

LC Urgent Q2: Police's handling of media reporting in demonstrations

Following is an urgent question by the Hon Lam Cheuk-ting under Rule 24(4) of the Rules of Procedure and a reply by the Secretary for Security, Mr John Lee, in the Legislative Council today (June 19):

Question:

On the 12th of this month, a large-scale confrontation between police officers and demonstrators occurred outside the Legislative Council Complex. According to a foreign journalist, he witnessed that despite some journalists having identified themselves, their equipment was searched, and they were insulted, chased, assaulted and sprayed with tear sprays by police officers, who even hurled tear gas rounds at them. Since over a million of members of the public took to the streets to protest on the Sunday just passed, some members of the public are worried that journalists will be treated in the aforesaid manner when large-scale demonstrations take place again in the near future. In this connection, will the Government guarantee that the Police will not treat journalists in the same manner again?

Reply:

President:

The Police all along respect press freedom and the media's right of reporting, and will also endeavour to facilitate media reporting and maintain effective communications and co-operation with the media. Therefore, the Police have been taking measures to facilitate media reporting as far as practicable.

In handling public order events, the Police will conduct holistic risk assessment based on the objectives, nature, number of participants, past experience and the latest situation of individual events for manpower deployment and formulation of operational plans and contingencies. The Police will also deploy manpower flexibly and implement crowd management measures in light of the prevailing circumstances to ensure public safety and public order.

The Police have formulated relevant guidelines for officers to identify and verify the identity of media practitioners during public order events or other police operations with the proof of identity or documents issued by media organisations or associations. While covering public order events, media practitioners should bring along the proof of identity of reporters or testimonials issued by their companies and can wear easily recognisable clothing and armbands so that police officers at scene can easily recognise them. The Police will examine relevant guidelines from time to time and will consider the opinion of frontline police officers in the process.

On the condition of not affecting operations, the Police have all along been assisting in media reporting as far as possible. Generally speaking, unless designating a press area will provide a vantage point for the media to cover the events, in principle the Police will not designate a press area in public place, where the media like other members of the public are allowed free access. If a designated press area is set up under the above-mentioned circumstances, the media are still free to move in and out of that press area. If a police cordon is set up for operational or investigative purpose at a scene of crime, traffic accident or emergency incident etc., the Police will consider setting up a designated press area where practicable to facilitate media reporting.

To further enhance the communications and co-operation with the media, the Police officially established the Force Media Liaison Cadre in December 2015. When necessary, the Police will deploy Cadre members to the scene of public order events or other police operations to provide facilitation and assistance to media practitioners covering the events at scene. Information officers of the Information Services Department staffed in the Police Public Relations Branch (PPRB) of the Hong Kong Police Force will also provide support and assist in handling media enquiries. If necessary, media practitioners conducting reporting at scene can seek assistance from the Force Media Liaison Cadre or liaise with the PPRB Newsroom which operates 24 hours round-the-clock.

On June 12, tens of thousands of protestors gathered in the vicinity of Tim Mei Avenue, Admiralty and Tim Wa Avenue. The scene was chaotic with the occurrence of violent acts. At all times, the Police have to protect the people and to maintain public order and public safety. The objective of the Police operation was against those using violence, with a view to controlling the scene and restoring order as soon as possible. The Police operation was only against unlawful acts, but not against persons of any industry.

In fact, on the day of operation, although manpower was tight, the Police had arranged 32 officers of the Force Media Liaison Cadre to provide facilitation to members of the media at the scene as far as practicable. The police officers at the scene on that day worked in the highly stressful and dangerous environment, with certain operations undertaken in a split-second. The Police have always appealed to media practitioners to put their own personal safety first and comply with the instructions of police officers at the scene while covering public order events or large-scale or chaotic demonstrations.

We understand the concerns expressed by some media practitioners regarding the Police's operation on the day. I reiterate that the Police attach great importance to the relationship with the media, and all along respect press freedom and the media's right of reporting. If anyone is dissatisfied with the Police, he or she may complain to the Complaints Against Police Office (CAPO). The existing complaints against police mechanism operates under the Independent Police Complaints Council Ordinance (Cap 604), with a clear legal basis, as well as effective and independent

monitoring. The first tier of the mechanism is the CAPO of the Police which receives and investigates into complaints. The second tier is the Independent Police Complaints Council which is statutory and independent. Under the two-tier police complaints system, any complaint against the Police will be handled in a fair and just manner. As such, it is not appropriate for me to comment on individual cases.

With regard to the Police's operation on June 12, CAPO has received 27 complaints referred by the Hong Kong Journalists Association. CAPO has set up a designated team to follow up the complaints where the relevant staff were not involved in the operation concerned to ensure that the complaints are handled properly.

On the basis of mutual respect and understanding, the Police will continue to maintain close communications and co-operation with the media and provide necessary assistance.

Thank you, President.