

LCQ1: Dangerous goods stolen from university campuses and cases of improvised explosive devices

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hak-kan and a reply by the Secretary for Security, Mr John Lee, in the Legislative Council today (January 15):

Question:

In recent months, huge quantities of dangerous chemicals have been stolen from the laboratories of three universities; improvised explosive devices and petrol bombs have been seized by the Police on a number of occasions; a secondary school laboratory assistant and two other persons have been arrested on the spot for suspected testing of remote-controlled bombs; a secondary school student has been prosecuted for suspected carrying of the explosive TATP to school; and rumours about plots to vandalise electricity supply facilities and to put poison into reservoirs have been circulated on the Internet. Regarding the law and order in Hong Kong, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows the respective quantities of the various types of chemicals stolen from the aforesaid laboratories and, among them, the respective quantities of those recovered and those still missing; the respective numbers of persons arrested and prosecuted for stealing such chemicals; the new measures put in place to ensure that the laboratories of universities and secondary schools are fitted with adequate anti-theft measures, and whether it will take measures to prevent persons with relevant criminal records from being employed to work in laboratories; if so, of the details;

(2) whether it stepped up, in the past six months, publicity efforts targeted operators of hardware stores to remind them not to sell dangerous chemicals to suspicious persons; if so, of the details; and

(3) of the new measures put in place to raise public vigilance against improvised explosive devices; whether it will take targeted measures to guard against attacks on electricity supply and water supply facilities?

Reply:

President,

In recent months, some lawbreakers stole chemicals for teaching and research purposes from university campuses. There were also a number of cases in which improvised explosive devices and petrol bombs were seized. Some cases even involved secondary school laboratory staff and students. In

addition, there were rumours on the Internet of people plotting to destroy electricity supply facilities and put poison into reservoirs. The Government attaches importance to the safety of the public. To ensure that departments are adequately prepared to respond swiftly and effectively, the Government has formulated various preventive and response measures.

Having consulted the relevant bureaux and departments, a consolidated reply to various parts of Hon Chan Hak-kan's question is provided as follows:

(1) In November last year, the Police received reports that dangerous goods including concentrated nitric acid, concentrated sulphuric acid, methanol, boric acid, petroleum ether and acetone, which are toxic, corrosive or flammable, had been stolen from The City University of Hong Kong, The Chinese University of Hong Kong and The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Given that the universities concerned still need time to sort out and count the stolen chemicals and those found on campus, the exact quantities cannot be provided for the time being. In the meantime, the Police are still investigating the cases concerned, including the whereabouts of the missing items, and so far no one has been arrested. For the Fire Services Department (FSD), it has proactively liaised with the tertiary institutions to review the storage of dangerous goods on campus, and reminded them to step up security and report to the Police as soon as possible if any dangerous goods or chemicals are found missing.

In response to the earlier theft incidents, the universities have strengthened the security arrangements for the storage of dangerous goods on campus. At the same time, taking into account their actual requirements, the universities have gradually taken necessary measures such as increasing the number of security guards and patrols, and implementing access control at individual entrances/exits, so as to improve the overall security level of the campuses and ensure the safety of students and staff.

As regards secondary schools, all schools are required to formulate safety management measures for science laboratories in accordance with the relevant legislation and guidelines on laboratory safety. Each school is required to establish a safety management system to formulate, handle and monitor measures and issues related to the safety level of its laboratories. Furthermore, to enhance the safety level of school laboratories, the Education Bureau conducts professional training programmes for teachers and laboratory technicians on a regular basis, as well as school inspections and visits to understand schools' needs and provide appropriate advice on laboratory safety.

The recruitment of staff, whether for universities or for secondary schools, is part of school management. Schools are responsible for employing suitable staff for performing the required tasks. As for the employment of laboratory staff, schools are responsible for assessing whether the staff employed are suitable. At present, there is no legislation or rule restricting the employment of persons with criminal records as laboratory staff. Determining whether a person is suitable for employment falls within the management and autonomy of schools, which will consider and make

decisions in a responsible manner.

(2) According to the Dangerous Goods Ordinance (Cap 295), it is an offence for a person to store, convey or use dangerous goods exceeding the exempt quantity without a valid licence. FSD has been very concerned that recently some lawbreakers recklessly stole dangerous goods and put them to improper use. In light of this, FSD has stepped up inspection and follow-up actions. From June to December last year, FSD proactively conducted over 660 related inspections. Apart from hardware stores, these inspections also covered various tertiary institutions, vehicle repair workshops and blackspots for excessive storage of dangerous goods. A total of 10 cases of unlicensed storage of Category 5 dangerous goods (i.e. flammable liquids) were detected, and FSD is following up on the relevant prosecution work. During inspections, fire personnel also reminded business operators and members of the public not to store excessive dangerous goods. If businesses find any person purchasing dangerous goods for illegal purposes, they should report to the Police for further investigation as soon as possible. FSD will continue to combat these illegal acts using an intelligence-led approach, and proactively conduct surprise inspections from time to time.

(3) Information on methods for making dangerous goods is circulated on the Internet. FSD has stated on many occasions openly that all acts of misusing dangerous goods during protests must stop so as not to endanger the lives and properties of the public. The Police have also repeatedly reminded the public that manufacturing or conspiring to manufacture explosives is a very serious offence, contravening section 54 of the Crimes Ordinance (Cap 200). The maximum penalty for which is 20 years' imprisonment upon conviction. If members of the public spot any dangerous goods, they should seek assistance from the Police as soon as possible, maintain an appropriate distance from such goods and avoid getting close to or touching them to prevent injury.

The Police expeditiously disseminates relevant information on cases involving improvised explosive devices to the public. In the past few months, the Hong Kong Police Force and FSD have been urging the public to enhance their vigilance through channels such as press conferences, press releases and social media (e.g. Facebook and Instagram). For example, in July last year, the Police found over one kilogram of self-produced powerful explosive of TATP in an industrial unit in Tsuen Wan, in December last year in the vicinity of Wah Yan College in Wan Chai, the Police found two radio-controlled improvised explosive devices weighing 10 kilograms in total, and the Police just arrested some persons in connection with a case of improvised explosive devices in Mong Kok and Sheung Shui yesterday. The Police proactively briefed the media on the details of the cases and displayed the exhibits as soon as possible. The Police also held press conferences and explained the hazards and destructive power of the explosives on the Force's social media. In addition, the Police organise sharing sessions with relevant organisations (such as MTR) to raise the awareness of the staff concerned in this respect. I will also use the appropriate occasions at the Legislative Council, such as the Panel on Security and question sessions just as today etc. to remind members of the public of the risks regarding improvised explosives devices, so that they will remain vigilant.

Regarding the security of critical infrastructure, the Police and relevant Government departments have all along been maintaining close liaison with the operators concerned to co-ordinate security arrangements and provide support in a timely manner. The Police have proactively liaised with operators to conduct immediate assessments of high-risk facilities and assist them in formulating security strategies to enhance the security arrangements and defence capabilities. In the past few months, the Police have conducted on-site security walkthroughs for over 25 critical electricity supply and waterworks infrastructure facilities, providing security recommendations and reviewing the situation of implementing security measures of various facilities. In this regard, the two power companies have enhanced the security measures for their power supply facilities based on risk assessments. The Water Supplies Department (WSD) also strengthens the security measures as required. Moreover, WSD regularly monitors the quality of the water from impounding reservoirs, and arranges staff to patrol impounding reservoirs to ensure there is no anomaly in the ecological environment. Raw water from impounding reservoirs is being treated in water treatment works, which have in place effective methods to monitor the quality of raw water received and to ensure the safety of drinking water.

Thank you, President.