

LCQ1: Tear gas affecting welfare service units

Following is a question by the Dr Hon Fernando Cheung and a reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (December 4):

Question:

It has been reported that during the Police's operations to disperse demonstrators since June this year, there have been a number of cases in which persons in elderly and rehabilitation service units felt unwell due to inhalation of tear gas, including the following two cases: on August 5, at least 13 rounds of tear gas were fired into the precincts of Caritas Jockey Club Tsuen Wan Social Service Building, which housed a care and attention home for the elderly and a day care centre for the elderly; and on October 28, tear gas billowed into a hostel for severely mentally handicapped persons and a long stay care home located in the vicinity of the Police's Tai Hing Operational Base. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) Whether, upon completion of each dispersal operation involving the firing of tear gas rounds, it conducted any assessment and survey on the number of persons in the nearby elderly and rehabilitation service units who had been affected by tear gas and the extent of the impacts, took follow-up actions and offered support to such service units; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) Whether it has, since June this year, issued guidelines to the various elderly and rehabilitation service units to advise them on the measures that they should take to prevent the persons in their units from being affected by tear gas, as well as the ways for handling the situation when their units have been affected by tear gas (including the removal of tear gas residue); if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) Of the composition of the tear gas rounds fired by the Police since June this year, and whether such composition has fatal or harmful long-term health impacts on the persons in the aforesaid units; whether the Government has assessed the health impacts of tear gas on different types of infirm persons (e.g. users of respiratory assistive devices) and persons with disabilities; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Social Welfare Department (SWD) maintains regular contacts with elderly and rehabilitation service units operated by subsidised and non-subsidised organisations to keep tabs of their operations and provide them

with appropriate reminders and assistance when necessary. Before commencement of foreseeable major public events (including the recent demonstrations), SWD will issue special reminders to the persons-in-charge of relevant service units to adopt appropriate contingency measures to safeguard the elderly and persons with disabilities. Furthermore, the District Social Welfare Offices of SWD will keep in contact with the police stations in their respective districts to inform them of the location of social welfare units, including in particular residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs) and residential care homes for persons with disabilities (RCHDs). In consultation with the Food and Health Bureau, the Security Bureau and SWD, my consolidated reply to the Member's question is as follows:

(1) When SWD learns that tear gas has been released in the vicinity of RCHEs or RCHDs, SWD will proactively contact the concerned homes to enquire about the conditions of their residents and staff, and remind the persons-in-charge to pay particular attention to health conditions of persons with respiratory difficulty and of frail health. According to information provided by the Food and Health Bureau and the Hospital Authority, those who were exposed to tear gas generally experienced mild respiratory and skin irritation, and there was also no serious health impact reported. Starting from last year, SWD has implemented the Visiting Medical Practitioner Service for Residential Care Homes for all RCHEs and RCHDs in the territory. If necessary, residential care homes may contact the concerned service providers to arrange the visit of medical practitioners and provide treatments to their residents.

SWD does not have statistics on the number of service users and staff in subsidised or non-subsidised elderly and rehabilitation service units affected by tear gas.

(2) The Department of Health has released health information on tear gas to the public, including the general post-exposure symptoms to tear gas and what to do after such exposure, how to handle the situation when staying in an indoor environment with tear gas released in the vicinity, and advice on cleaning tear gas residual materials at living places, etc. Besides, the Centre for Food Safety has issued advice to the public on contaminants and food safety. SWD has reminded the persons-in-charge of all RCHEs and RCHDs to refer to the above information.

(3) Members of the public have the right to expression, speech and assembly, but they must do so in a peaceful and lawful manner. When illegal acts occur, the Police have a statutory duty to maintain public safety and public order.

On the procurement of equipment and ammunitions, the Police have been sourcing globally for safe and suitable equipment and ammunitions in accordance with the established policies and procedures to meet their operational needs. As the details of the equipment used by the Police involve operational deployment, it would be inappropriate to disclose such details as it would affect the Police's operational capability. The Police will continue the safe use of tear gas in accordance with the supplier's guidelines as well as their internal ones.

The Government must reiterate that it is not for the Police to choose

the location required for the use of tear gas against violence or illegal acts. Rather, it depends on the persons who have committed violence or illegal acts and where they chose to commit such acts. The Police understand the community's concerns about the use of tear gas near residential areas, and will take into account the safety and interests of the affected people as far as possible when using tear gas. Before operations, the Police will, as far as possible, maintain close contact with the nearby building management offices, commercial tenants and elderly homes through various channels to remind them of Police's possible actions in relation to the demonstrations so that they can make arrangements accordingly. During operations, the Police will also appeal to residents in the vicinity to pay attention to the situation through social media and press releases, and to close the windows and stay in a safe place indoors if necessary.

As regards the impact of tear gas on health, as I have mentioned in part one of the question, according to information provided by the Food and Health Bureau and the Hospital Authority, those who were exposed to tear gas generally experienced mild respiratory and skin irritation, and there was also no serious health impact reported.