

LCQ10: Impacts of public order events on railway services

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hak-kan and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (November 13):

Question:

Since June this year, members of the public have taken to the streets for many times to stage demonstrations. Radical demonstrators wantonly vandalised MTR station facilities, resulting in temporary closure of a number of MTR stations and reduction in railway services. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows, since June this year,

(i) the number of MTR station facilities vandalised, as well as the repair and reprovisioning costs thus incurred by the MTR Corporation Limited (MTRCL);

(ii) the number of train trips cancelled and the number of passenger trips affected;

(iii) the number of reports made by MTRCL to the Police for assistance;

(iv) the number of MTRCL staff reported to have sustained injuries; and

(v) the additional manpower engaged by MTRCL, with a breakdown by job type;

(2) of the respective numbers of persons arrested, prosecuted and convicted since June this year for alleged vandalism of railway facilities; the penalties imposed on those convicted;

(3) whether it knows if MTRCL has sought compensation from the convicted persons mentioned in (2); if MTRCL has, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(4) as it has been reported that MTRCL specially arranged, during demonstrations, trains to carry demonstrators to other MTR stations for leaving, whether it knows the relevant details (including the number of trips arranged); whether MTRCL was required, in respect of this arrangement, to seek prior consent from the relevant government departments and report to those departments afterwards; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(5) whether the number of general crimes which happened in MTR stations has shown an upward trend since June this year; if so, of the details, and whether it has assessed if the closed-circuit television systems in a number of MTR stations having been vandalised is one of the causes; and

(6) of the new measures in place to ensure the normal operation of railway services and to protect the personal safety of passengers?

Reply:

President,

The continuous large-scale public order events taking place since this June have had an unprecedented impact on the services of the Mass Transit Railway (MTR). The station facilities, such as ticket machines, add-value machines, entry/exit gates, CCTV cameras, fire services installations, etc, at the MTR stations were often targeted for destruction in protests over recent months. Petrol bombs were hurled at and fires set to the stations and their entrances/exits, causing significant damage to MTR property and posing serious threat to the safety of MTR passengers, staff and other people on the scene.

My reply to the question raised by the Hon Chan Hak-kan is as follows:

(1)(i) As of November 7, among the 93 heavy rail and 68 light rail stations, a cumulative total of 85 heavy rail and 60 light rail stations were vandalised, involving numerous facilities such as entry/exit gates (about 1 600 times), ticket machines, Octopus add-value machines/enquiry processors and Customer Service Centre facilities (961 times), Octopus fare processors on light rail platforms (952 times), CCTV cameras (about 1 100 times), escalators (77 times), lifts (about 50 times), glass panels at station entrances/exits (1 076 times) and roller shutters of station entrances/exits (137 times). Various vandalised station facilities are still in need of repair, and many components and parts are yet to be manufactured and shipped to Hong Kong for re-installation and test-run. The repair and replacement fees will be assessed and confirmed in due course.

(ii) The regular service hours for MTR railway lines and stations have been from approximately 5am to approximately 1am, with more than 8 000 train trips daily. In the first half of 2019, MTR provides service to an average of 5.5 million passenger journeys a day. However, from June this year onwards, the MTRCL has adjusted its train services as necessary during public order events to strengthen the protection to the safety of passengers, staff and the railway. Such adjustments included bypassing certain stations, closing certain station entrances/exits or a whole station, suspending operation of an entire railway line when many of its stations were being attacked, or even terminating service of the whole railway network early. Due to variations in the scale of each public order event, the number of stations attacked and their distribution, areas of stations affected, the damage they sustained, the scenes of the attacks and the conditions in the vicinity, coupled with chaos caused by sudden incidents at the scenes, immediate on-the-spot response was necessary. As such, it is difficult for the MTRCL to compile exact statistics on the number of train trips cancelled.

The recent continuous attacks of rioters to stations have indeed imposed grave danger to passengers, MTR staff and railway safety. MTR was also unable to provide services, making the general public unable to commute and live as

usual. The patronage of August to September this year has dropped 8 per cent compared to that of last year. Moreover, in a long weekend in early October, the situation has worsened. Damages brought by an arson act of rioters escalated which seriously harmed railway safety. At the end, the MTRCL has no choice but to suspend all railway services on October 4 (Friday) evening and on the whole day of October 5 (Saturday), while the Airport Express could only resume limited service (point-to-point service between Hong Kong Station and the Airport Station) in the afternoon of October 5. If we take the average 5.5 million passenger journeys of MTR in the first half of 2019 as the calculation basis, a large number of passenger was affected that weekend.

Taking into account the actual condition of the railway system and upon conducting risk assessment, the MTRCL has decided to end all train services early (except for the Airport Express) since early October so as to allow time for repair and reduce risks. Take for example the ending of all railway services at 11.30pm daily between November 4 and 8, the number of train trips affected every day was over 330.

(iii) From June to early November, the MTRCL has made reports to the Police over 900 times regarding vandalism and arson inside MTR stations, station staff being threatened, trespassers on railway tracks, etc.

(iv) There were over 20 cases in which the MTRCL frontline staff were harassed and injured, including being pushed and shoved when handling disputes and being hit by hard objects hurled by the protestors.

(v) In respect of the MTRCL manpower, as many facilities have been repeatedly vandalised, the maintenance team of the MTRCL has to carry out overnight repair work. Contractors are engaged while maintenance workers are also redeployed from other departments of the MTRCL through flexible arrangement to assist in the repair work in order to expedite the progress. The frontline station staff and maintenance staff have been overstretched owing to numerous acts of vandalism and nuisance. Besides, the MTRCL is highly concerned about the violent incidents and the rampant fare evasion inside MTR stations. Hence, a Special By-laws Enforcement Team is newly set up in recent months to help enforce the MTR By-Laws. The team consists of some 160 members who are MTR staff on permanent establishment from the By-laws Inspection Unit/Customer Service and Revenue Protection Unit or security personnel provided by the contractors. More professional security personnel, from initially 100 to currently around 1 000, have been arranged to provide additional support at MTR stations to ensure the safety of the passengers and the staff. In the light of recent public order events, the MTRCL has strengthened its manpower inside stations and platforms to, inter alia, manage passenger flow, maintain station order and assist in station operations.

(2) Police do not maintain a breakdown of the number of people arrested, prosecuted and convicted for damaging MTR facilities. Overall speaking, as at October 31, 2019, the Police arrested a total of 3 001 people in the public order events in relation to the amendments of the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance, among whom 510 were charged with offences such as "criminal damage" and "arson". According to the Crimes Ordinance (Cap. 200), a person

guilty of destroying or damaging property and arson shall be liable on conviction to a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. Among them, from June to September 2019, 164 criminal damage cases were reported in Police's Railway District, most of which involved damaging MTR facilities, with only very few involving damaging private properties.

(3) The MTRCL has made reports to the Police regarding vandalism and arson inside MTR stations, station staff being threatened, trespassers on railway tracks, etc. The MTRCL reserved the rights to sue and claim compensation for any loss suffered.

(4) The MTRCL has been committed to providing safe and reliable railway services for passengers. That said, in order for the MTRCL to provide railway services, the railway itself should first and foremost be able to operate safely. The MTRCL and relevant government departments (including the Transport and Housing Bureau, the Transport Department and the Police) have closely monitored the situation of public order events and conducted risk assessment so as to implement appropriate measures to strengthen the safety of passengers, staff and the railway.

During large-scale public order events from June to mid-August, the MTRCL has, in the light of the Police's dispersal actions in the vicinity of individual stations, made corresponding train service arrangements, i.e. directing the trains with passengers to bypass the stations while at the same time dispatching empty trains directly to those stations to pick passengers up. The MTRCL has all along maintained communication with relevant government departments and implement the above arrangements in order to prevent more passengers from entering into the affected stations, while at the same time assisting to disperse passengers who got stuck at those stations. The MTRCL has not kept record of the corresponding special train service arrangements.

Since July, damages and disturbance occurred in railway area and violent incidents later on further escalated. When violent situations occur in stations, the safety of passenger was endangered. The best solution to ensure safety is to avoid passengers appear or stay in the affected stations. Thus, the MTRCL must, when necessary, adjust its service within a short time (or even without prior notice) in response to such sudden and emergency situations, including bypassing certain stations, closing certain station entrances/exits or the whole station, suspending operation of an entire railway line when many of its stations were being attacked, or even terminating service of the whole railway network early.

The MTRCL will continue to make the best endeavour to provide services to the public under safe condition and as far as practicable. Government departments and the MTRCL will, in the interest of safety, continue to assess the risk of upcoming public order events, so as to adopt suitable operational arrangement for the public.

(5) From June to September 2019, 536 crimes were reported in Police's Railway District, among which 164 were criminal damage cases (most of which involved damaging MTR facilities, with only very few involving damaging private properties). This represents a significant increase of 72 per cent (318 per

cent for criminal damage cases) over the 311 cases reported during the same period in 2018 (among which five were criminal damage cases).

In the unlawful assemblies over the past few months, many of the violent protestors who engaged in violent acts used facial covering to hide their identities and extensively damaged the closed circuit television systems in public areas (including the closed circuit television equipment in most MTR stations), which hindered the Police's enforcement actions and made it more difficult for evidence gathering, such that they might evade liability.

Masked violent protesters' repeated acts in vandalising MTR facilities wantonly pose serious threat to the safety of MTR passengers and their staff, as well as the railway operation. Such acts also seriously affect the commuting by members of the public. The Government has repeatedly stressed that regardless of their demands, protesters should not resort to violence and illegal acts. Beautifying violence or illegal acts would only give rise to more violence, and ultimately it would be the whole society and the general public being suffered. The Government will not tolerate any illegal or violent acts, or acts that prejudice public safety or public order, and will take stringent follow-up actions.

(6) The MTRCL will keep in view the latest situation, and enhance security measures at stations to ensure the safety of passengers, MTR staff and the railway, taking into account the risk assessment results, practical needs and the actual conditions of station entrances/exits. In addition to engaging additional station security staff and related manpower as mentioned in the above reply to part (1) of the question, the MTRCL has also stepped up station security by installing and strengthening roller shutters, protecting glass panels and other facilities at entrances/exits of different stations. The MTRCL is also reviewing long-term measures of station security. Moreover, the MTRCL will continue to, having regard to the actual circumstances, maintain close liaison with bailiffs and the Police in taking appropriate action according to the Interim Injunction Order granted by the Court (which prohibits a person from unlawfully, intentionally and wilfully obstructing or interfering with the proper use of the stations and trains of the railway network, as well as the West Kowloon Station of the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link, and prohibits a person from damaging any property or train, using any threatening language or behaving in a riotous or disorderly manner at any MTR station, and obstructing or interfering with any staff of the MTRCL under the circumstances specified in the Order).

As regards to the enforcement work in railway areas, the Police have set up the Railway District to maintain railway network's safety and order. The Police will, having regard to the operational needs, continue to deploy suitable manpower to take all practical and legitimate measures to prevent and detect crimes and to maintain public safety and public order.