

LCQ11: Public transport services under adverse weather conditions

Following is a question by the Hon Benson Luk and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Logistics, Mr Lam Sai-hung, in the Legislative Council today (November 1):

Question:

It has been reported that during the time when the Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal No. 8 and No. 9 were in force as Typhoon Koinu hit Hong Kong earlier, the operation of public transport services, including buses, taxis and the open sections of the railway system, had nearly come to a complete halt. As a result, over 10 000 travellers arriving in Hong Kong had been stranded at the airport for several hours, many members of the public had to spend as long as six hours waiting for public transport services, and some taxi drivers demanded a surcharge of over \$1,000 from passengers. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) on the premise of technical and operational safety being the prime consideration, whether it will request the MTR Corporation Limited (MTRCL) to maintain train service (i) between the airport and downtown and (ii) in core districts (e.g. at a train frequency of one trip per hour) during extremely adverse weather conditions; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) in the long term, whether the Government will consider enacting legislation to set a uniform surcharge for taxi service offered by taxis with comprehensive insurance cover under extremely adverse weather conditions, with a view to curbing the act of overcharging of taxi fares; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) whether it has plans to request MTRCL to continue to provide limited railway service for one to two hours after the issuance of the Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal No. 9; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(4) whether it has explored with the sectors concerned improvements to the operation hours of petrol filling stations and gas filling stations as well as fuel supply arrangements under extremely adverse weather conditions; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(5) in the short term, whether the Government will make prior arrangement for a certain number of minibuses or single-deck buses to be on standby whenever extremely adverse weather conditions are forecasted for Hong Kong, with a view to instantly facilitating the flow of travellers arriving in Hong Kong at the airport if necessary; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

My consolidated reply to the question raised by the Hon Benson Luk is as follows:

Under adverse weather conditions (for example, when Tropical Cyclone (TC) Warning Signal No. 8 or higher is in force, or when the Government makes an "extreme conditions" announcement (Note 1)), ensuring the safety of members of the public and visitors is our top priority. During such weather conditions, members of the public and visitors should remain indoors temporarily as far as possible for their safety. While public transport services are provided to the extent feasible, public transport operators have to weigh the risks of driving and operating during adverse weather, so as to ensure the safety of passengers, drivers and other staff members, as well as that of the rescue personnel.

When TC Warning Signal No. 8 is hoisted by the Hong Kong Observatory (HKO), both local road transport, including franchised buses and green minibuses, and public water transport are generally suspended for safety considerations, and the MTR Corporation Limited (MTRCL) provides limited railway services only. When the HKO raises the TC Warning Signal to No. 9 or above, the MTRCL has to suspend the service on all open sections of the railway for safety reasons, while maintaining limited service on underground sections. At present, the suspension of MTR service on all open sections of the railway under TC Warning Signal No. 9 is a mechanism developed through comprehensive studies and deliberations, having regard to safety considerations of railway system design and experience gained from previous incidents happened during typhoons, with a view to preventing trains, overhead lines and tracks from being affected by strong winds and external objects that may lead to incidents and jeopardise the safety of passengers and railways.

As land transport was suspended due to the hoisting of TC Warning Signal No. 9 during the strike of Typhoon Koinu earlier, some passengers had to stay at the airport. We consider that a more effective direction of improvement is to enhance crowd management at the airport during adverse weather. The aspects of such enhancement will include exploring ways to inform passengers of the typhoon and road traffic conditions as soon as possible, and making better arrangements for them to wait for the resumption of transport services at the airport terminal in a safe and comfortable manner. In this regard, as some passengers may still opt for taxis during typhoons, the Airport Authority Hong Kong will, in the future, allocate chips when there are a large number of passengers waiting for taxis, so that they may take rest elsewhere at the airport and check their waiting status through mobile phones without having to queue up in person. The Government has also requested the MTRCL to study thoroughly and cautiously the arrangements for the suspension of Airport Express under TC Warning Signal No. 9, explore the feasibility of optimising information dissemination, and review the relevant contingency

plans, with a view to minimising the impact on members of the public and visitors under the premise of safety.

As for taxis, under the Road Traffic (Public Service Vehicles) Regulations (Cap. 374D) (the Regulations), the fare for the hiring of taxis should generally be calculated in accordance with the scale of fares specified in Schedule 5 to the Regulations (i.e. the fare as shown on the taximeter). If a taxi picks up passengers directly on the street or at a taxi stand on a non-booked basis, the taxi driver should charge the meter fare, and no surcharge should be charged on the passengers. Besides, under Regulation 38 of the Regulations, a registered taxi owner may also hire the taxi to a hirer on a hire-as-a-whole basis.

If taxis or other vehicles for carriage of passengers (such as coaches) continue to provide services under adverse weather conditions, regardless of whether such vehicles are covered by valid comprehensive motor insurance policies, the risk of travelling in adverse weather conditions must also be balanced to ensure the safety of the drivers and passengers.

During adverse weather, while petrol filling stations suspend services in accordance with safety policy of operators, the 12 dedicated liquefied petroleum gas filling stations (dedicated stations) across the city maintain their services where safety permits. During recent strike of Typhoon Koinu when TC Warning Signals No. 8 and No. 9 were hoisted, at least six dedicated stations maintained their refilling services at different times. The Government and the operators will review the relevant arrangements from time to time.

Note 1: In the case where a Super Typhoon or other natural disasters of a substantial scale seriously affects the working public to resume work or bring safety concern for a prolonged period, such as large-scale power outage, extensive fallen windows from high-rises leading to dangerous streetscape, major landslides, extensive flooding, widespread serious obstruction of public transport services, if situation warrants, the Government will decide whether it is necessary to make a territory-wide "extreme conditions" announcement.