

LCQ15: Procurement of equipment and ammunition by Police

Following is a question by the Hon Dennis Kwok and a written reply by the Secretary for Security, Mr John Lee, in the Legislative Council today (December 18):

Question:

It has been reported that since as many as some 16 000 tear gas canisters (which include tear gas rounds and tear gas grenades) have been used by the Police to disperse crowds since June this year, members of the public are very concerned about the health impacts of tear gas. Also, Mainland-made tear gas canisters used in recent months by the Police reach a higher temperature during combustion when compared with those used in the past and they easily catch fire. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective quantities of (i) tear gas rounds, (ii) tear gas grenades and (iii) other arms and ammunition (please specify) made on the Mainland which were procured by the Police in the past 12 months, as well as the respective dates of the procurement;

(2) of the standards and procedure adopted by the Police for selecting suppliers of arms and ammunition;

(3) whether the Police, before procurement, have conducted tests on the safety and suitability of each type of the arms and ammunition; if so, of the findings of such tests conducted in the past 12 months;

(4) whether the Police have provided training for police officers on the proper use of each type of the arms and ammunition made on the Mainland; if so, whether such training differs from the training in respect of the arms and ammunition procured elsewhere;

(5) as the Government indicated earlier on that the Department of Health (DH) and the Hong Kong Poison Information Centre (HKPIC) of the Hospital Authority had found no literature nor scientific evidence on dioxins poisoning cases caused by the use of tear gas, whether DH, HKPIC and other relevant government departments have conducted empirical studies on the toxic chemicals released by the specific models of tear gas canisters used by the Police, and on the risks of dioxins poisoning and other health hazards caused by tear gas, taking into account the use of hundreds of such canisters on several occasions on a single day in the same densely populated urban area;

(6) as the Government indicated earlier on that no abnormality has been detected in the monitoring results recorded by the various air quality and water quality monitoring stations since June this year, (i) whether the

Environmental Protection Department (EPD) knows the components of the tear gas released, and (ii) whether these components are covered in the respective parameters currently used in calculating the Air Quality Health Index and monitoring water quality, so that such components can be detected;

(7) as the Government claimed that tear gas was basically substance in the form of particulates and would disperse within localised areas, whether EPD will, by using the existing stationary air quality monitoring stations or other means, enhance the monitoring of air quality so as to detect any localised changes in air quality caused by the intense use of tear gas;

(8) given that there are reports of serious health problems suffered by journalists and nearby residents after inhaling the tear gas in locations where there was intense use of tear gas canisters, what actions the Government has taken in response to such reports;

(9) whether the Government will consider expeditiously putting in place a health surveillance system on the whole population to detect any unusual health reports that may relate to inhaling tear gas; if so, of the details;

(10) whether the Police's relevant guidelines and training on the use of tear gas canisters specify the circumstances under which or the kinds of environment in which tear gas should not be used; and

(11) as the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department has issued guidelines to its employees and cleansing service contractors on cleansing residues of tear gas, whether the Government can provide a copy of such guidelines?

Reply:

President,

Members of the public enjoy the freedoms of expression, speech and assembly, but must exercise these freedoms in a lawful manner. According to section 10 of the Police Force Ordinance (PFO) (Cap 232), it is the statutory duty of the Police to maintain public safety and public order. Since June 9 this year, more than 1 000 protests, processions and public meetings have been staged in Hong Kong, many of which eventually turned into serious illegal acts of violence. When public order and public safety are severely threatened by situations such as illegal blockage of roads, paralysed traffic, unlawful assemblies and violent charging of police cordon lines, the Police must take appropriate actions to maintain law and order and safeguard public peace. If the public express their views in a peaceful and lawful manner, there would be no need for the Police to use any force.

The Police have strict guidelines on the use of force. Police officers will only use appropriate force when it is necessary. Police officers will, as far as circumstances permit, give various forms of warning before using force, and give the persons the opportunity to obey police orders.

All the use of force by the Police are conscious decisions made having

regard to actual circumstances and needs with due considerations. Tear gas serves to create a safe distance between police officers and protesters, so as to avoid close confrontation and to reduce the chance of injury to both parties as far as practicable, while dispersing the crowd and controlling the violent scenes.

Our reply to various parts of the question raised by Hon Dennis Kwok is as follows:

(1) to (4) and (10) It has been a practice of the Police, having regard to their operational needs, to conduct market researches and field tests on various types of equipment and ammunitions manufactured worldwide in accordance with the established policies and the Stores and Procurement Regulations (SPR), in order to ensure that the equipment and ammunitions procured will meet the safety standard. According to SPR, the controlling officer of the Police (i.e. the Commissioner of Police) shall make the procurement decisions under his purview to ensure that the procurement exercises are conducted in strict compliance with SPR. The tear gas procured by the Police has passed the safety tests for ensuring that the stability and safety of such ammunitions comply with relevant specifications.

As the procurement 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 manufacturer's guidelines and internal ones.

To ensure that officers can enhance their action capabilities and meet the actual operational needs, the Police have continuously reviewed police officers' equipment, procured appropriate equipment and ammunitions in accordance with the established policies, procedures and guidelines and provided relevant training to police officers.

The Police have stringent rules and guidelines on the use of force and firearms. Every newly recruited and serving police officer has to go through rigorous training on the use of force, so that they may fully understand different legitimate uses of force in a safe and effective manner to achieve relevant lawful purposes. On the use of tear gas, every police officer who has to handle tear gas is required to receive relevant training, so as to fully understand the use of tear gas safely and effectively, and to ensure that they can discharge their duties in a professional manner.

(5), (8) & (9) On the health effects of tear gas, the Department of Health (DH) has uploaded health information on tear gas to the website of the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) for general public's reference. Please refer to the Annex for the relevant health information. In general, health effects of tear gas depend on a number of factors such as the specific chemical composition of the tear gas, duration and dose of exposure, exposure route, health conditions of the individuals and the physical environment during exposure. Individuals who had been exposed to tear gas with persistent symptoms should consult healthcare professionals.

According to the Hospital Authority (HA), there were cases where people attended the accident and emergency (A&E) departments of the HA due to discomfort after exposure to tear gas. Those who were exposed to tear gas generally experienced mild respiratory and skin irritation, and there was no serious health impact reported. Most of them could be immediately discharged after rinsing and receiving treatment at the A&E departments. Decontamination facilities are available at all 18 A&E departments of the HA for treating patients who have been exposed to biochemical/hazardous substances. Healthcare personnel are also experienced in treating these cases.

The DH and Hong Kong Poison Information Centre of the HA have reviewed relevant medical literature and scientific evidence but have found no literature or scientific evidence on dioxin poisoning cases caused by the use of tear gas.

We will continue to proactively study and understand the relevant situations from the public health perspective, and will continue to engage experts from relevant fields in the process. We aim to provide the public with accurate information through more extensive communication and explanations.

We note that the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) has sent water and soil samples collected at various locations (including locations where tear gas was launched) on campus for the analysis of the presence of dioxins and other contaminants. As we understand from the press release of CUHK, the results of the analysis showed that the amount of contaminants in the soil and water samples were well within the safety standards, and therefore "the health hazard of these contaminants from the soil and water are negligible".

(6) & (7) Tear gas contains 2-chlorobenzalmalononitrile, commonly known as CS. As CS is not a substance that is often found in air or water, the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) does not include it as a parameter when calculating the Air Quality Health Index or the Water Quality Index. However, because tear gas is released into the air as particles, the particulate matter (PM) data recorded at the air monitoring station near the area where the tear gas is launched can reflect the impact of the tear gas on the entire area. The EPD has analysed all the PM data recorded at the air quality monitoring stations near the areas where tear gas was launched since June this year. The analysis was done by comparing the PM levels recorded at the monitoring station during the period when tear gas was launched and the period before, as well as comparing the data with those recorded at other monitoring stations where no tear gas was launched. According to the analysis, the EPD did not find any anomalies in the PM levels recorded at the monitoring stations near the areas where tear gas was launched. This indicates that the use of tear gas would not increase the PM concentrations significantly in the concerned area. On the other hand, there were instances showing that when arson activities took place near a monitoring station, the PM concentrations recorded at the station increased to high level for several hours which was almost double the normal levels for that day. This reflects

that arson activities will significantly affect the air quality in the vicinity.

(11) The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has issued guidelines to its employees and cleansing service contractors, which contain points to note on cleaning chemical residues and personal protective equipment. Cleansing workers should wear masks, rubber gloves, and rubber aprons at work. They should also put on N95 (or equivalent) respirators, goggles and hats as deemed necessary. If the affected public places are suspected of having chemical residues, tools such as high pressure water jet and pressure washer surface cleaner should not be used to avoid stirring up the residual materials. Also, when operating street washing vehicles, the staff should turn off the auxiliary engines of the vehicles or adjust the water pressure level of the nozzles to the minimum to avoid dispersion of the residual materials. Cleansing workers should report discovery of dangerous goods or chemical waste at work to FEHD, which will then refer the cases to relevant departments. FEHD also conducts routine and surprise inspections to check on its cleansing service contractors' performance.