

## LCQ18: Customs and Excise Department proactively combats various smuggling activities

Following is a question by the Hon Jimmy Ng and a written reply by the Secretary for Security, Mr John Lee, in the Legislative Council today (May 16):

Question:

According to the information of the Security Bureau, there has been an upward trend in smuggling activities by air in recent years. The number of such cases detected by the Customs and Excise Department increased from 4 141 in 2013 to 7 786 in 2017, representing a cumulative increase of nearly 90 per cent; and among them, the trend of increase was more apparent for cases of smuggling by means of air postal packets and express cargoes (with a rate of increase being 264 per cent), and the percentage of which in the total number of air smuggling cases also increased from 12 per cent in 2013 to 23 per cent in 2017. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of each type of air smuggling cases detected (including cases of bringing undeclared dutiable goods into Hong Kong as well as import or export of prohibited/controlled articles without the licences/certificates required by the law) in each of the past five years (i.e. from 2013 to 2017); and among the people engaged in such smuggling activities, of the respective percentages of individual travellers and members of organised crime syndicates;

(2) given that the rapid development of e-commerce in recent years has made it increasingly convenient and inexpensive for smugglers to transport illicit articles by means of air postal packets and express cargoes, of the targeted measures, on the premise of striking a balance between facilitating e-commerce and curbing smuggling activities, to be adopted by the authorities for eradicating such smuggling activities; whether the authorities have plans to deploy additional cargo examination staff and detector dogs to various air cargo terminals and the Air Mail Centre; if so, of the numbers; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) given that the number of cases involving the use of air postal packets and express cargoes to smuggle drugs in 2017 increased by almost 40 per cent compared with that in 2016, and that there is an array of tactics used by drug traffickers to commit crimes and conceal drugs, of the mechanism or procedure to be adopted by the authorities for detecting drugs in air postal packets and express cargoes, as well as the advanced examination equipment or chemical processes that will be employed for this purpose?

Reply:

President,

The Customs and Excise Department (C&ED) is the primary agency responsible for the suppression of smuggling activities in Hong Kong. Smuggling refers to the illegal movement of goods and articles into and out of Hong Kong. Common smuggling activities include bringing undeclared dutiable goods (e.g. cigarettes) into Hong Kong, as well as import and export of prohibited/controlled articles (e.g. dangerous drugs, infringing goods, endangered species, firearms, ammunition and weapons, etc.) without licences/certificates required by the law. The enforcement powers for customs officers are vested in various ordinances, mainly the Customs and Excise Service Ordinance (Cap 342) and the Import and Export Ordinance (Cap 60). The maximum penalty for conviction on indictment of the most serious smuggling offence is life imprisonment and an unlimited fine.

C&ED has all along been combating various smuggling activities proactively, and the overall smuggling situation in Hong Kong has been under effective control. C&ED noticed that in recent years, smugglers are transporting illicit articles through air postal packets and express cargoes, which are increasingly convenient and much lower in cost. Against this trend, C&ED has devised pragmatic and holistic strategies to intercept illicit articles, in an efficient way, from being transported to and from Hong Kong.

My reply to the various parts of the question is as follows:

(1) In the past five years, the number of air smuggling cases (including through cargoes, postal packets and travellers) detected by C&ED surged from 4 141 cases in 2013 to 7 786 cases in 2017, involving dutiable goods, dangerous drugs, infringing goods, endangered species as well as firearms, ammunition and weapons (see details at Annex). C&ED does not have statistics on the respective percentages of individual travellers and members of organised crime syndicates among the people engaged in such smuggling activities.

(2) C&ED adopts an intelligence-driven and risk management approach to guard against and combat criminal activities. Apart from taking stringent enforcement actions at the airport and various boundary control points, the Syndicate Crimes Investigation Bureau was set up in 2013 to combat organised crime syndicates by conducting in-depth investigation into the syndicated mode of smuggling operation and employing financial investigation skills to trace criminal proceeds and funding sources. In light of the exponential growth in the volume of air postal packets and express cargoes, C&ED has implemented multi-pronged strategies and measures to cope with this challenge.

On deployment of manpower resources, customs officers station at all air cargo terminals and Air Mail Centre (AMC) round the clock. In combating smuggling activities using air postal packets and express cargoes, C&ED steps up the enforcement through flexible manpower deployment and with the assistance of canine units to detect narcotics. C&ED has planned to create additional new posts to enhance law enforcement capability on customs clearance of air cargoes and postal articles.

On collaboration with the industry, C&ED has been working closely with express couriers to facilitate its law enforcement. In 2015, C&ED signed a Memorandum of Understanding with major express courier operators to address the ever-increasing smuggling activities. Meanwhile, C&ED shares with frontline courier staff the latest smuggling trend through regular outreach programmes. C&ED has also taken the initiative in co-operating with the Hongkong Post to enhance examination of high-risk air postal packets at AMC and other mail processing centres.

On intelligence gathering, C&ED has enhanced networking with Mainland and overseas law enforcement agencies through frequent and timely intelligence exchanges and mounting of joint operations. In addition, C&ED is proactively developing the Customs and Excise Information and Risk Management System (CEIRMS). CEIRMS will provide a centralised repository to facilitate quick entity matching and analysis of information as well as automatically capture the latest findings of an entity being searched, making C&ED's risk profiling work more efficient. CEIRMS will be implemented in June 2018.

On publicity and education, C&ED has been actively disseminating anti-smuggling messages to the public through leaflets, press conferences, press interviews with officers and other means. C&ED also launches various initiatives to educate youngsters, such as the Youth Ambassador Against Internet Piracy Scheme, and joins hands with the Education Bureau to enhance the youth's self-discipline and civic responsibility to stay away from illicit activities.

(3) To enhance detection capability, C&ED has been actively using advance technology in customs clearance. Keeping abreast of the technological development in x-ray scanners and trace detectors, C&ED is endeavoured to source the most updated equipment for deployment by frontline staff, including the ion scanner and Raman spectroscopy for detection of narcotics and explosives, as well as other specialised equipment such as the fibrescope, density meter, radiation detector, etc.

Besides, C&ED is working towards enhancing the degree of automation in postal clearance, so that selected air postal packets can be automatically and more quickly conveyed to the customs examination hall for x-ray scanning and further inspection if required. This will facilitate elimination of labour-intensive processes, enabling frontline staff to focus on risk profiling and examination of selected packets.