

LCQ19: Cleansing of police uniforms

Following is a question by the Hon Joseph Lee and a written reply by the Secretary for Security, Mr John Lee, in the Legislative Council today (January 8):

Question:

Since June last year, the Police have used a total of some 16 000 tear gas canisters during public meetings and processions. Some online rumours have claimed that some frontline police officers took their uniforms and other clothing (police clothing) worn at work to self-service laundries for washing. As such police clothing might have been stained with residues of chemicals from tear gas canisters, some members of the public are worried about their clothing washed at such laundries being contaminated. Regarding the washing of clothing which might have been contaminated by chemicals, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether the Police have formulated guidelines on the decontamination and washing procedure for police clothing which might have been contaminated by chemicals;

(2) whether the clothing of uniformed and plain-clothed police officers is required to be sent to designated laundries for washing; if so, of the locations of such laundries and their operation details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) whether the Police have, since June 9 last year, outsourced laundry work; if so, of the details, including the decontamination and washing procedure to be followed by the service contractors, as well as whether it is provided in such procedure that police clothing which might have been contaminated by chemicals must be handled separately from other clothing; and

(4) given that on the evening of November 17 last year, the Police fired a number of tear gas canisters on Gascoigne Road adjacent to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, whether the Police have liaised with the Hospital Authority afterwards for making special arrangements for washing the clothing in the hospital which might have been contaminated by chemicals?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the question raised by Hon Joseph Lee is as follows:

Since early June last year, more than 1 200 protests, processions and public assemblies have been staged in Hong Kong, many of which ended up in violent illegal acts. When illegal acts take place, the Police must take appropriate law enforcement actions to maintain public order, protect lives

and properties of citizens, as well as preserve the public peace. The Police would not need to use any force if members of the public could express their views in a peaceful and lawful manner.

The Police have strict guidelines on the use of force. Tear gas is used to create a safe distance between police officers and protesters, so as to avoid close confrontation and to reduce the chance of injury to either party as far as practicable, while dispersing the crowd and controlling the violent scenes.

Tear gas contains 2-chlorobenzalmalononitrile, commonly known as CS, and is released into the air as particles. In general, post-exposure symptoms to tear gas may include burning sensation to the skin and eyes, coughing, sneezing and temporary breathing difficulty resulted from irritation to the nose and throat. These symptoms will usually subside after a short period of time. On the health effects of tear gas, the Department of Health has uploaded health information on tear gas to the website of the Centre for Health Protection for the public's reference.

As we understand from international literatures, similar to ordinary stains, CS will be washed into water during the washing process and will gradually dissolve in water. The dissolved CS will be hydrolysed rapidly. This is especially so when the temperature of the water will be increased during the normal washing process and the pH will also be increased by the alkaline additives used in the washing powder, as both processes will accelerate the CS hydrolysis process. Generally speaking, CS has a half-life of only one minute in water of 25 degrees Celsius and a pH value of 9 with general laundry detergents in the washing process. Therefore, ordinary laundry progress can already handle CS residuals that may be stained on clothes.

As stipulated in the Police General Orders, officers should ensure that they are correctly dressed when in uniform at all times and that uniforms are kept clean and neatly pressed. Over the years, there have been arrangements in allowing police uniforms to be cleaned by laundries inside police stations which are operated by outsourced service contractors. Hence, according to the current arrangement, officers (both uniformed or plainclothes) participating in the operations may hand their uniforms or operational outfits to the laundries run by outsourced service contractors in police stations for washing, based on their operational needs. Police have not received any report of discomfort or health problems on the wearing of cleaned clothing all along.

Regarding the incident occurred in the vicinity of Queen Elizabeth Hospital (QEH) on November 18, 2019, QEH has been closely monitoring the indoor air quality and made suitable arrangements, including temporarily suspending intake of fresh air to the ventilation system at specific areas, sealing off windows and turning on the indoor air curtains to reduce air infiltration. Portable air purifiers have been deployed to individual wards in need. In addition, QEH has arranged environmental cleansing and started replacing the air filters of ventilation system and medical compressed air

system.

QEH has maintained communication with its staff and provided necessary support regarding the incident. Staff Clinic has also provided support to staff who experienced discomfort under the influence of tear gas.