

LCQ2: Emergency rescue work at scenes of public events

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

Question:

It has been reported that on the evening of the 18th of last month, dozens of demonstrators in Yau Ma Tei fell down when they dodged to avoid being rounded up and arrested by the Police, with some of them stacking on top of one another and their lives hanging by a thread. Volunteer first-aiders at the scene tried to administer first aid treatment for them but were driven away by police officers with batons. The Police have all along denied that there was any stampede incident. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the details of the Fire Services Department's handling of the injured persons in the aforesaid incident, including the numbers of ambulance personnel and ambulances deployed and the time of their arrival at the scene, their eyewitness reports made to the Fire Services Communication Centre (including whether there was any incident of people stacking on top of one another), and the number of injured persons, with a breakdown by the gender and age distribution of such persons, the seriousness of their injuries and the time of their arrival at the hospital; whether the law enforcement actions of the Police hindered and delayed the rescue work;

(2) whether police officers are required, when carrying out arrest actions in public events, to make the life safety and medical needs of the people at scenes the prime considerations; if they are required to do so, whether the police officers concerned in the aforesaid incident violated the relevant requirements; if they are not required to do so, of the reasons for that; and

(3) whether it will consider afresh setting up an independent commission of inquiry to inquire about whether the force used by the police officers in the law enforcement actions taken in respect of the movement of opposition to the proposed legislative amendments (including the aforesaid incident) was of an appropriate level?

Reply:

President,

Members of the public enjoy the freedoms of expression, speech and assembly, but they must abide by the law. According to section 10 of the Police Force Ordinance (Cap 232), it is the statutory duty of the Police to maintain public safety and public order. Therefore, if any unlawful act

occurs, the Police must take appropriate actions to restore public peace. If the public express their views in a peaceful and lawful manner, there is no need for the Police to use any force.

Since June 9 this year up till now, more than 1 000 protests, processions and public meetings have been staged in Hong Kong, and many of which eventually turned into serious illegal acts of violence. To respond to and curb violent acts, police officers have to deploy appropriate force to control the situations and bring rioters to justice so as to restore public safety and public order.

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

(1) and (2) Regarding the illegal acts on the evening of November 18, there are a few points that need to be set out to help us understand the development of the incident:

Firstly, netizens had called on a large number of people online to block the roads in various districts on November 18, claiming that it was a tactic of distracting the Police – "besieging Wei to rescue Zhao" (i.e. relieving a besieged ally by attacking the home base of the besiegers), so that unlawful protesters inside the Hong Kong Polytechnic University would be able to escape.

Secondly, from that evening until the small hours of November 19, thousands of rioters wreaked havoc and blocked roads in Yau Ma Tei (YMT) and Jordan areas, including building barricades with sundries, attacking police officers with bricks and sundries, and hurling nearly a thousand petrol bombs in total, posing serious threats to the personal safety and lives of the public and the police officers at the scene.

Thirdly, before conducting dispersal and arrest operations, the Police had repeatedly warned rioters for a considerable period to stop their illegal acts and leave the scene but in vain. Police officers had therefore used tear gas to effect dispersal and arrest unlawful rioters.

During the operation, rioters tried to escape in order to evade legal liability, and some of them fell down at various locations when fleeing. Police officers at the scene took crowd management measures immediately and arranged assistance from ambulance and fire personnel who arrived at the scene. Before the ambulance personnel arrived, police officers also provided preliminary treatment for the injured persons. The Police arrested a total of 213 persons that night and the arrestees were charged with the offence of "taking part in a riot".

On the night of November 18, while handling an "automatic fire alarm" incident outside Exit A1 of YMT Station, at around 11.30 pm, fire personnel noticed that a large number of people were running to the direction of Pitt Street from Nathan Road, and there were people who fell in the passageway between Exit A1 of YMT Station and Bell House. There were also people who continued to flee by crossing those who fell. Fire personnel immediately

reported the situation to the Fire Services Communications Centre and requested for reinforcement. In the meantime, the fire personnel at the scene started rescue operation immediately and spent about 10 minutes to carry more than 30 trapped people to a safe place.

The first ambulance arrived at the junction of Waterloo Road and Nathan Road at 11.48pm. As the area around Dundas Street, Waterloo Road eastbound and Nathan Road northbound was blocked by a large number of bricks and obstacles, ambulances called to the scene could not park nearby. Therefore, ambulance personnel need to bring the ambulance stretchers and equipment to the site from further away. The ambulance personnel conveyed the first injured person to the nearest Kwong Wah Hospital for treatment on foot by using an ambulance stretcher at 12.02am. They also conveyed other injured persons in batches having regard to their level of injuries to different hospitals for treatment. At about 4.30am, the last batch of the injured persons with relatively minor injuries was conveyed to the hospitals. During the course of operation, ambulance personnel provided preliminary treatment for injured persons on the spot.

In the incident, the Fire Services Department (FSD) dispatched a total of 10 fire appliances, 41 ambulances, 48 fire personnel and 123 ambulance personnel. FSD conveyed altogether 33 people, including 26 males and seven females, to different hospitals for treatment, among those were four police officers. Apart from two adults whose ages were unknown, the rest of the injured persons were aged between 16 and 45. Their injuries included sprains, polypnea, dizziness, vomiting, bone fracture, etc. The youngest injured person was a 16-year-old who suffered head and back injuries. The eldest injured persons were two 45-year-olds who had dislocated fingers, shortness of breath and hand injuries. In the incident, fire personnel provided on-site triage of casualties with the assistance of the Police.

Under all circumstances, the Police will consider the needs of injured persons and will not obstruct any rescue work. They will try their best to facilitate ambulance and medical services. At the same time, the Police must take into account the circumstances, safety and security situations at scene. During rescue operations, FSD and the Police will co-ordinate closely to ensure that injured persons can receive medical treatment in the first instance when it is safe to do so.

According to the Police's guidelines, if an arrestee is injured at the scene of crime or during arrest, that person will be arranged to receive treatment. Most police officers have received first aid and basic medical training and are able to provide preliminary treatment for injured persons before ambulance personnel arrive at the scene. In handling injured arrestees, the Police must also consider the safety and security of arrestees.

(3) The Government considers it appropriate for the Independent Police Complaints Council (IPCC) to handle complaints against police officers. IPCC was established under the Independent Police Complaints Council Ordinance (Cap 604) and operates independently to perform its statutory functions,

which include observing, monitoring and reviewing the handling and investigation of reportable complaints by the Complaints Against Police Office and making recommendations on the handling and investigation of complaints.

IPCC is proactively studying a number of major public order events held since June 9 and the corresponding actions taken by the Police. IPCC has also indicated that it would strive to publish the first preliminary report by around January next year where practicable. We opine that IPCC should be allowed to perform its statutory functions under the prevailing mechanism and proceed with the study proactively. Given the complexity of the work of the study, I hope that the public would give IPCC the time and room for completing this important work. The report to be submitted by IPCC to the Chief Executive will be made available to the public for examination in detail. The Government will carefully consider the recommendations of the report to decide on the appropriate follow-up actions.

Thank you, President.