

LCQ2: Measures to stop violence and curb disorder

Following is a question by the Hon Starry Lee and a reply by the Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr Matthew Cheung Kin-chung, in the Legislative Council today (December 11):

Question:

The disturbances arising from the opposition to the proposed legislative amendments have persisted for half a year, during which the radicals have incessantly blocked roads, vandalised facilities and attacked police officers and members of the public, and some people even died. The targets and scope of their attacks are continually expanding and the weapons they use are increasingly lethal. There are comments that apart from dealing a heavy blow to the economy and international reputation of Hong Kong, the chaotic situation has also resulted in members of the public being tormented by the turmoil and social dissension. Members of the public are deprived of freedom of speech and a normal life as they silence themselves to avoid attacks and dare not go out because of personal safety concern. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will set up a coordinating committee on stopping violence and curbing disorder, to be chaired by the Chief Executive with members comprising the relevant Secretaries of Departments, Directors of Bureaux and Heads of Departments, to make pragmatic and objective assessment and judgment, on a daily basis, on the latest situation on the street, the damages to public facilities, traffic conditions, etc, and to instruct the relevant government departments to take preventive and contingency measures to curb violence, so as to safeguard the safety, dignity and human rights of members of the public and ensure the smooth operation of public transport;

(2) as there are comments that the results of the District Council Ordinary Election held last month have reflected the distrust of many members of the public in the Government and their dissatisfaction with its performance in policy implementation, whether the Government has conducted a review in this regard; if so, of the outcome and improvement measures; and in order to rebuild the trust of members of the public in the Government, how the Government will tackle as early as possible the torrent of unsubstantiated information on the Internet, lest the social atmosphere is agitated; and

(3) whether the Chief Executive will, before setting up an independent review committee, first alleviate the dissension within society properly and eliminate the confrontational and hostile sentiments between the police and the public; if so, of the measures in place; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Our reply to Hon Starry Lee's question is as follows:

(1) To tackle the spate of illegal activities during the civil unrest since June this year, the Chief Executive (CE) has been leading the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSARG) to handle the issues and ensure the normal functioning of the society. At the meeting held every weekday morning, CE, together with all Principal Officials (POs), will review and discuss the latest situation and the response to that. In addition, CE will hold meetings with the concerned POs to plan and deliberate on tactics in the light of the latest development. On the days of large-scale public order events (POEs) (usually on Sundays), CE would chair meetings with POs to monitor and respond to the situation. Further, in early October this year, CE formed a high-level inter-bureau task force within the Government. The purpose is to co-ordinate and follow up on the series of issues arising from the recent social unrest. In terms of actual operation, the Government will in accordance with established practice activate the "Emergency Monitoring and Support Centre" (EMSC) in a timely manner as appropriate. Apart from monitoring the situation during POEs in different districts, EMSC will also communicate and coordinate with relevant departments and assist the Government to co-ordinate emergency response as required. EMSC will make timely reports to the key officials to keep them up-to-date.

To effectively cope with and expeditiously respond to POEs involving escalated violence, I, as the Chief Secretary for Administration, chair a high-level Inter-departmental Action Task Force (IATF). The function of IATF is to oversee and co-ordinate the various actions that bureaux and departments need to take expeditiously and effectively to monitor, respond to and follow up on the situations, as well as to disseminate information and dispel rumours. The objective is to support the Police in stopping violence and curbing disorder. The work of IATF includes expeditious removal of street blockages and speedy repairs to damage done to public facilities so that members of the public can resume their daily routine as quickly as possible. In addition, IATF has followed up on major incidents such as the closure of the Cross Harbour Tunnel (CHT) owing to serious damage caused by violent protestors. Under the co-ordination of IATF and with close collaboration of the relevant departments (including the Transport Department, Highways Department, Electrical and Mechanical Services Department, Architectural Services Department, Fire Services Department, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and the Police), we completed the repair works quickly and re-opened CHT within a short period of time. Before and immediately after the re-opening of CHT, the Government arranged special ferry service to cater for the commuting needs of the local residents.

We are keenly aware that in order to cope with the serious situation that Hong Kong is currently facing, all bureaux and departments must work together as a team and in unity. At a meeting with the Heads of Departments, CE clearly required all bureaux and departments to spare no effort in stopping violence and curbing disorder. Through high-level co-ordination, we will continue to strengthen collaboration amongst the departments and closely

monitor and react swiftly to the development of the protest actions, with a view to ensuring that the community can be business as usual as soon as possible.

(2) The 2019 District Council Ordinary Election ("the Election") was held smoothly on November 24. The cumulative turnout rate, of about 71.2 per cent, is a record high. This shows that voters hoped to express their views through the Election. In general, the poll was held in a peaceful, safe and orderly manner, representing a wish of the public for the community to return to a peaceful and safe one as soon as possible.

The Government respects the Election results. We have noticed that there are various analyses and interpretations in the community in relation to the results. Quite a few are of the view that the results reflect people's dissatisfaction with the current situation and the deep-seated problems in society. We will listen to the opinions of members of the public humbly and seriously reflect.

Regarding online messages, the Information Services Department (ISD) and bureaux and departments have been closely monitoring the situation. When it is spotted that unverified information circulating widely online is stirring up negative sentiment in the community, the Government will make clarifications via multiple channels as soon as possible to allay concerns. ISD has set up a dedicated webpage and launched a series of one-minuters on the social media platforms to disseminate government clarifications and important messages. At the same time, ISD has launched a set of TV/radio APIs themed "Check facts to keep fake news in check" to remind the general public to beware of various information that they come across.

(3) Members of the public enjoy the freedom of expression, speech and assembly in accordance with the law. The Police have a statutory duty to maintain public safety and public order. When unlawful acts take place, the Police must take appropriate actions to respond. If there is no unlawful act, the Police do not need to take any enforcement action at all. We understand that recent violent protests have caused tension between the Police and the public. However, to maintain rule of law and public order in an effective manner in Hong Kong, efforts and strength of the Police alone are not enough. Support and cooperation of the public are also required. Only with mutual understanding of each other can we restore order in society and ensure Hong Kong continues to be a safe city.

CE and the political team will continue to engage in in-depth dialogue with people of different political stances and background in the community, so as to get a better understanding of the deep-seated problems in society and find pragmatic solutions. In addition, we have announced that we will invite community leaders, experts and academics to set up an independent review committee to examine and review the deep-seated social problems. We hope that through looking into the causes of the social events that took place in the past months, the committee can come up with solutions for the Government. We will listen to the views of the community before we decide on the timing to set up the committee.

Thank you, President.