

LCQ21: Search and rescue operations under adverse weather conditions

Following is a question by the Hon Nixie Lam and a written reply by the Acting Secretary for Security, Mr Michael Cheuk, in the Legislative Council today (November 1):

Question:

In recent years, the occurrence of extreme weather conditions in Hong Kong has become increasingly frequent. However, it has been reported that some members of the public have disregarded the Government's warnings and engaged in outdoor activities when typhoons or rainstorms hit Hong Kong, making it necessary for the Hong Kong Fire Services Department (FSD) and the Government Flying Service (GFS) to conduct search and rescue (S&R) operations under adverse weather conditions from time to time. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of cases received by the authorities in each of the past three years in which people sought assistance due to dangerous situations encountered while engaging in outdoor activities under adverse weather conditions, together with a breakdown by the type of adverse weather conditions (e.g. storms and rainstorms) and the nature of the requests for assistance; the respective numbers of such cases in which the Hong Kong Police Force, the FSD and the GFS were involved in S&R operations;

(2) of the average cost of the S&R operations conducted by the GFS during adverse weather conditions; and

(3) as it has been reported that there have been cases of misuse of the S&R services of the GFS, whether the authorities will (i) step up publicity and education to call on members of the public not to misuse such services, (ii) review the existing mechanism and S&R guidelines, (iii) follow up on cases of service misuse, and (iv) by making reference to overseas practices of adopting deterrent measures, impose charges on a cost-recovery basis on those who seek assistance due to dangerous situations encountered while engaging in outdoor activities under extreme weather; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Government Flying Service (GFS), the Fire Services Department (FSD) and the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF), our consolidated reply to the question raised by the Member is as follows.

(1) Since 2020, the FSD and the HKPF have been deployed to handle a total of

35 mountain rescue or immersion incidents when an Amber, Red or Black Rainstorm Warning, or Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal No. 3 or above was issued by the Hong Kong Observatory (see table below). Among these incidents, 11 required the deployment of the GFS to provide air search and rescue services.

Year	Number of mountain rescue incidents		Number of immersion incidents	
	When a Rainstorm Warning Signal was in force	When Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal No. 3 or above was in force	When a Rainstorm Warning Signal was in force	When Tropical Cyclone Warning Signal No. 3 or above was in force
2020	1	0	2	0
2021	2	3	1	1
2022	7	3	0	1
2023 (as at September 30)	5	3	6	0
Total	15	9	9	2

(2) The annual average direct operating costs of the helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft deployed by the GFS for search and rescue call-outs in 2022 are tabulated below. The figures only include the maintenance cost and fuel cost of the aircraft type concerned, and have not taken into account the salary cost of the staff deployed and the related administrative cost of the department in the calculation. The GFS has not maintained a statistical breakdown of the operating cost under inclement weather either.

	Average direct operating cost per hour flown (\$)
Helicopter H 175	26,740
Helicopter EC 155B1	42,020
Fixed-wing aircraft CL 605	17,970

(3) The Government has always accorded top priority to public safety and the protection of people's life and property. When calls for various emergencies are received, the HKPF and the FSD will immediately assess the nature of each incident and deploy appropriate resources to the scene. The GFS will be requested to provide air search and rescue services if deemed necessary upon assessment. Members of the public cannot directly call up the GFS for

assistance. Upon receiving an emergency request, the GFS will make prompt and appropriate deployment having regard to the conditions and location of the wounded and the sick, and arrange aircraft and/or helicopters services to provide appropriate emergency support for those in need of help or to evacuate them from dangerous locations as soon as possible. While the Government strongly discourages the public from taking risks to perform outdoor activities under inclement weather, effective, reliable and efficient emergency services will still be provided to people in distress or in need under all circumstances. The last thing we want to see is those in need being hesitant in seeking emergency call services due to any reasons, including levy.

Different government departments have been appealing to members of the public through various channels for their special attention to the risks of engaging in outdoor activities under inclement weather to prevent accidents. Relevant departments have also constantly reviewed their emergency response capabilities during accidents, and stepped up their educational and publicity efforts to raise effectiveness. For instance, the GFS has disseminated information through its website and social media platform pages about safety in outdoor activities, including knowledge about safe hiking, tips on pre-trip preparation, points to note on safety during the activities and ways to seek help when in distress. The GFS has also joined with the FSD and the Civil Aid Service, etc, to regularly organise the Mountaineering Safety Promotion Day with a view to enhancing public knowledge and safety awareness of mountaineering activities.