

LCQ22: Safe venues for celebrations by members of the ethnic minorities

Following is a question by the Hon Cheung Kwok-kwan and a written reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Caspar Tsui, in the Legislative Council today (December 9):

Question:

On the 15th of last month, a fire broke out in a unit of a tenement building in Yau Ma Tei, resulting in more than 10 casualties. It has been reported that the unit concerned was an unlicensed Nepali restaurant, in which several Nepali families were celebrating Tihar and holding a birthday party at the time of the incident. During Tihar, all Nepali households observe the custom by lighting up candles or oil lamps on the floor. It is suspected that the fire was caused by some candles on the floor next to the restaurant entrance setting alight inflammable objects. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has gained an understanding of the customs of the religions and traditional festivities of the various ethnic minority communities in Hong Kong and, among them, those activities which may pose safety hazards; whether it will step up publicity and education efforts targeting at members of the ethnic minorities to enhance their awareness of safety when conducting festivities;

(2) whether it will make proposals to the leaders of ethnic minority communities on conducting festivities in a manner that can ensure safety, and provide them with the assistance and resources needed, such as providing electric candles used for celebrating Tihar as a replacement for live candles; and

(3) as some members of the ethnic minorities have indicated that, owing to the lack of activity venues, they have no choice but to gather and celebrate festivals in unlicensed restaurants or residential units which are not provided with sufficient fire safety facilities, whether the Government will immediately examine if there are adequate venues available to members of the ethnic minorities for conducting activities safely, and designate, for their priority use, certain venues in those districts where relatively more members of ethnic minorities reside (such as Sham Shui Po, Yau Tsim Mong, Wan Chai and Yuen Long)?

Reply:

President,

The Government is deeply saddened by the deaths in the fire on Canton

Road in Yau Ma Tei in the night of November 15. The Government expresses our deepest condolences to the families of the deceased, the injured and all the victims. Relevant government departments, together with local organisations and ethnic minority organisations, have provided immediate support to the affected residents. In consultation with the Security Bureau, our reply to the questions raised by the Hon Cheung Kwok-kwan is set out below:

(1) and (2) In Hong Kong, we have people of different ethnicities. Each ethnicity has its own traditional festivals and people from different geographic regions follow different celebration customs. Taking Dashain (also known as Dussehra) and Diwali, the major festivals in Hinduism, as examples, followers from India and Nepal organise rituals and celebration activities from around September to November each year according to their own calendars. Regardless of differences in cultural backgrounds and traditional customs, residents are advised to observe the relevant regulations on fire safety and building safety when organising festive activities. It is of utmost importance to raise awareness in public safety.

In respect of enhancing the awareness of fire safety, the Fire Services Department (FSD) has been maintaining liaison with organisations or contact persons of local ethnic minorities communities to organise fire safety talks for ethnic minorities and recruit them to become Fire Safety Ambassadors and Building Fire Safety Envoys. In addition, the FSD also employed three ethnic minorities, who are able to communicate in South Asian languages, for organising and arranging educational work on fire safety and community emergency preparedness for the ethnic minority communities. Besides, the FSD also translated the fire safety pamphlets related to code of fire prevention at home and main points during fire escape into eight languages including Urdu, Nepali, Hindi, etc., and uploaded onto the FSD website.

After the fire, the FSD has taken the initiative to strengthen the reaching out to local ethnic minorities and relevant groups, to learn about their gathering places, and conduct fire safety inspections in these places and enhance the general knowledge of fire safety, such as fire prevention and actions to be taken in the event of a fire, etc. In respect of the fire safety publicity work, the FSD will strengthen the publicity and educational activities, which include the demonstration on the use of fire extinguisher and fire blanket, in districts with relatively more ethnic minorities to enhance public awareness and knowledge of fire safety. Furthermore, the FSD will also design new publicity materials with languages of ethnic minorities to enhance the effectiveness of publicity work.

The support service centres for ethnic minorities, which are commissioned by the Home Affairs Department (HAD), have regularly organised home safety workshops, first-aid classes, etc. with a view to raising ethnic minorities' awareness in home safety and enhancing their first-aid knowledge and skills. The HAD and the FSD will continue to promote fire safety to ethnic minorities and remind them about the need to handle fire and flammable substances used in the rituals with extra care. The FSD will also advise them to handle the ignition sources with due care and take fire precaution measures when they are conducting any religious and traditional festive

activities in order to protect the lives and properties.

(3) Apart from gathering in public places, same as other members of the public and/or organisations, ethnic minority individuals and/or organisations could, subject to meeting the relevant venue hiring conditions, book different public venues and facilities (such as sports and cultural venues and community hall facilities) from relevant departments for use or organisation of various kinds of activities.