

LCQ3: Theft of dangerous chemicals from university laboratories

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Kin-por and a reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (December 11):

Question:

It has been reported that the laboratories of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and two other universities were intruded into one after the other by radical demonstrators last month, and some dangerous chemicals therein were stolen. The poisonous and dangerous chemicals stolen from CUHK include 17.5 litres of concentrated sulphuric acid, 2.5 litres of hexane, as well as 80 litres of concentrated nitric acid that may be used for making 10 000 acid bombs. If radical demonstrators use weapons made from such chemicals at demonstrations, the lives and safety of police officers and members of the public will be seriously threatened. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows the total quantities of chemicals stolen from the various universities since June this year, and the quantities of lethal weapons that may be made from such chemicals;

(2) why CUHK's laboratories were allowed to store such large quantities of dangerous chemicals; of the legislation currently in place to regulate the storage of dangerous chemicals in various university laboratories; whether the Government will require the various universities to strengthen the security measures at their laboratories, so as to prevent dangerous chemicals from being stolen again; and

(3) in the light of the potential threats posed by demonstrators' possible use of highly lethal chemical weapons, how the Government safeguards the safety of frontline police officers and members of the public?

Reply:

President,

Recently, some universities were damaged or even occupied by protesters. Some even made and used weapons on campus, leaving university campuses in a devastated state and causing multiple injuries. The universities are assessing the damage done to their campuses while some have commenced restoration works. Moreover, some chemicals stored on campus for teaching and research purposes have been stolen. These include some toxic, corrosive, and inflammable chemicals. If outlaws use these items to make weapons, the lives and property of members of the public will be seriously affected with adverse consequences. The cases concerned are extremely serious and have posed dangerous threat to public safety. The universities have reported to the

Police and left the cases to the Police for follow-up actions and investigations.

Our reply to Hon Chan Kin-por's question is as follows:

(1) The Education Bureau (EDB) has been maintaining liaison with the universities in respect of the incidents that have happened on campus in recent months. The EDB is aware of the theft of chemicals stored in certain universities, and the universities concerned have reported the matter to the Police for action. It is understood that the dangerous chemicals stolen from the three universities (including the City University of Hong Kong, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University) include toxic, corrosive, and inflammable items such as concentrated nitric acid and concentrated sulfuric acid. If these chemical substances are mixed with other liquids or mishandled, combustion and explosion might occur. Moreover, the improper use or storage of those substances will cause danger to oneself and others. Universities concerned are still sorting and counting the stolen chemicals, so the relevant quantities cannot be provided for the time being. The Police are actively recovering the missing items and so far no one has been arrested.

According to the Dangerous Goods Ordinance (DGO) (Cap 295), it is an offence for a person to store, convey or use dangerous goods exceeding an exempt quantity without a valid licence. Besides, there have been cases in which people learned to make dangerous items from methods circulated on the Internet. The Police remind the public that manufacturing or conspiring to manufacture explosives is an extremely serious offence. According to section 54 of the Crimes Ordinance (Cap 200), the maximum penalty upon conviction will be 20 years' imprisonment. The Police have the confidence and ability to investigate such crime and urge members of the public should refrain from engaging in illegal activities.

(2) The storage of dangerous goods is regulated under the DGO, and the classification of dangerous goods and the exempt quantities of different categories of dangerous goods under the DGO are stipulated in the Dangerous Goods (Application and Exemption) Regulations (Cap 295A) and the Dangerous Goods (General) Regulations (Cap 295B) respectively. A licence issued by the Fire Services Department (FSD) under the DGO is required for storage of dangerous goods exceeding exempt quantities. Upon receipt of an application for a dangerous goods licence, the FSD will conduct a risk assessment based on the actual circumstances of each case and formulate corresponding fire safety requirements for the applicant to comply with. A licence for storage of dangerous goods will be issued to an applicant only after an inspection has been conducted and full compliance with the fire safety requirements is confirmed. FSD will also conduct inspections proactively from time to time. Should there be any violation of the fire safety requirements or conditions of licence, the FSD will take relevant enforcement actions in accordance with the DGO.

The EDB has learnt from the relevant institutions that there are laboratories in individual faculties (such as faculties of science, engineering, and medicine) of the University Grants Committee-funded

universities and that the use of different chemicals is required for teaching and research purposes. If the chemicals in the laboratories fall within the definition of dangerous goods under the DGO, the universities have established a monitoring mechanism to ensure that the storage and use of dangerous goods on campus meet the requirements of the relevant ordinance. The laboratory management staff of the universities will procure and store the chemicals in accordance with actual teaching and research needs and strictly observe the DGO and other relevant fire safety regulations.

In response to the theft of chemicals in universities, all universities have taken prompt action to enhance on-campus security by hiring additional security staff, increasing security patrols, adopting identity verification and registration procedures at campus entrances/exits, and strengthening the security measures for dangerous goods stores. All students and staff of the universities have been informed of the relevant arrangements.

In view of the recent social situation and to further safeguard public safety, the FSD has proactively contacted the tertiary institutions to review the situation of the storage of dangerous goods on campus, and to remind the institutions to step up security measures, and report to the Police immediately if any dangerous goods or chemicals were found missing. The EDB will also provide universities with appropriate assistance in enhancing their security measures, depending on actual needs.

(3) The mission of the FSD is to protect the life and property of the public from fire or other calamity. When facing and handling incidents involving dangerous goods and chemicals, fire personnel will carry out firefighting and rescue operations in accordance with the relevant guidelines. In case unknown chemicals are found during an operation, the FSD will perform a risk assessment and take appropriate measures immediately. If necessary, the FSD will contact staff of the Government Laboratory and seek their professional advice on the proper handling of chemicals to protect public safety.

The Police attach great importance to the safety of police officers during their execution of duties, and have been proactively taking measures to review the personal protective equipment of front-line police officers from time to time. The Police will also procure or replace suitable equipment as appropriate, so as to meet the actual operational needs and enhance the safety of officers. If members of the public find any dangerous goods, they should seek assistance from the Police as soon as possible. To avoid injury, they should keep an appropriate distance from the dangerous goods and refrain from getting close to or touching them.

Thank you, President.