

## LCQ5: Guard against the spread of extremism

Following is a question by the Hon Elizabeth Quat and a reply by the Secretary for Security, Mr Tang Ping-keung, in the Legislative Council today (July 14):

Question:

It has been reported that since the implementation of the National Security Law for Hong Kong last year, riot-related crimes have plunged, but radicals' acts of disseminating false information and seditious remarks on the Internet with an intent to revive violence have not been curbed. On the 1st of this month, someone hurled flammable objects at the Government House, and a man stabbed and wounded a police officer with a sharp knife. Some people subsequently glorified such criminal acts on the Internet, and some people even mourned for the attacker who had killed himself at the scene of the attack. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that recently the Police have detected cases of possession of explosives and firearms, and that the aforesaid "lone-wolf" terrorist attack has occurred, whether the Government will raise the threat level of terrorist attacks faced by Hong Kong and strengthen counter-terrorism efforts; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) as it has been reported that in recent years, some people have frequently disseminated false information, incited hatred, advocated violence and spread extremism on the Internet, of the progress of the study conducted by the Government on enacting legislation to combat the dissemination of such undesirable information; whether it will, by following the laws and regulations in overseas regions, allow the Government to institute legal proceedings for defamation and criminalise defamation; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) what specific measures, apart from stepping up efforts to combat relevant crimes, the Government has put in place to mend the social rift as well as strengthen communication and mutual trust among various sectors of society, so as to guard against the spread of extremism?

Reply:

President,

The implementation of the Hong Kong National Security Law (HKNSL) since last year has yielded immediate and noticeable results. Social stability has been restored and public safety ensured. Yet, a handful of extremists have not given up and continue to spread seditious remarks on the Internet to incite hatred and advocate the use of violence for expressing their political stance or ideological assertions. Some of them have even planned actual acts

of violence. For people who have attempted to rationalise or down play violent attacks, their damage and harm inflicted upon society are equally serious.

The entire community in Hong Kong should strongly condemn individuals who disregard law and order, advocate terrorism or incite the commission of terrorist activities. Such acts will certainly be vigorously tackled by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government in accordance with the law.

My reply to the three parts of the question raised by the Hon Elizabeth Quat is as follows:

(1) At present, the threat of terrorist attacks faced by Hong Kong remains "moderate". The "moderate" level means there is a possibility of an attack, but there is no specific intelligence suggesting that Hong Kong is likely to be a target. The Police's assessment shows that the chance of "lone-wolf" attacks under individual circumstances cannot be ruled out but there is currently no concrete intelligence indicating that such an attack will happen. Members of the public could go on with their daily lives and travels as they are not affected. Therefore, it is appropriate to maintain the threat of terrorist attacks at the "moderate" level.

The Police makes on-going assessments of the situation and intelligence. Once specific and reliable intelligence is obtained, such as knowing about the plan of a terrorist organisation of launching an attack which poses tangible threat to the public, we will raise the threat level to "high" based on assessment. Accordingly, immediate alert will be made to the public and a series of escalated preventive measures may be required to stop the attack from happening, such as requiring security checks on personal belongings of all bus and MTR passengers or even closing some MTR stations. As for the airport, it may also be necessary to step up the checking of passenger luggage and incoming vehicles at that time. As such, members of the public and travellers may be required to arrive at the airport three to five hours in advance. All these measures will inevitably bring inconvenience to the public. Given the wide impact, the decision to raise the threat level of terrorist attacks is a very prudent one, with safeguarding public safety being the prime consideration. Such decision is made based on specific intelligence, as any hasty move may cause public inconvenience or even panic.

Regarding counter-terrorism (CT) work, the Security Bureau and the Inter-departmental Counter-terrorism Unit have been making unceasing efforts and staying highly vigilant at all times. They have been enhancing Hong Kong's overall CT and response capability in a comprehensive manner through a series of measures on areas including intelligence collection, enhanced patrols, training and CT exercises for continuous strengthening in Hong Kong's CT preparedness. In parallel, protection of critical infrastructures has been enhanced, and CT education and publicity have been implemented for building strength and consensus in society.

(2) In recent years, there have been numerous violent attacks in Hong Kong. Very often, attackers of these cases have been affected by false information

on the Internet and online messages for inciting violence and hatred, resulting in commission of serious illegal acts. The "lone-wolf" attack happened on July 1 is a concrete example. In view of the grave harm inflicted upon society by fake news and extreme ideologies, offences of abusing online platforms for blatantly inciting hatred and violence in the community should be tackled seriously.

As regards the proposed enactment of legislation against fake news, as the relevant work involves many complicated and controversial issues, the Secretary for Home Affairs will seriously examine the experience and practices of other countries and places to provide reference for the next step of work.

Even though there is not yet any legislation against fake news, various provisions are in place under the existing legal framework to deal with dissemination of inappropriate information. For example, under sections 9 and 10 of the Crimes Ordinance, it is a criminal offence to do any act with a seditious intention or utter any seditious words, and handle or possess any seditious publication.

Besides, specific provisions are also in place for various crimes under the HKNSL to deal with spreading of seditious or extreme ideologies. Among them, Articles 21 and 23 of the HKNSL prohibit anyone from inciting, assisting in, or abetting others to commit secession and subversion of the state power, Article 27 prohibits advocating terrorism and inciting commission of terrorist activities and Article 29 prohibits conspiracy with a foreign country or an institution, organisation or individual outside the Mainland, Hong Kong, and Macao of the People's Republic of China to provoke hatred among Hong Kong residents towards the Central People's Government or the HKSAR Government, which is likely to cause serious consequences.

(3) On the internet, some people blatantly disseminate false information to mislead the public and fabricate facts to incite hatred towards the Government. To strengthen communication and mutual trust among various sectors of the society, one of the top priorities of work is to make prompt clarification about false information and deploy all feasible administrative and legal steps to combat dissemination of false information and fake news, such that prejudices and conflicts created by false information and fake news can be rectified and eradicated, and the community can get back on track. We also hope that the entire community would join hands to say "no" to violence. At the same time, the Government will, through various channels, encourage members of the public to comprehensively appreciate our nation's development, correctly understand "one country, two systems" and develop a sense of identity, belonging and responsibility towards our country, our nation and our society.

The HKSAR Government will strive to do a good job in administration, strengthen communication with various sectors and young people in particular, and provide the younger generation with an excellent learning environment and diversified development opportunities. Through different measures, the HKSAR Government hopes to assist young people in leveraging their own strengths and cultivate in them a positive attitude towards life, a commitment to society,

a sense of national identity, an affection for Hong Kong and an international perspective, such that they could contribute to the development of Hong Kong and the country.

Thank you, President.