

LCQ5: News reporting of RTHK

Following is a question by the Hon Luk Chung-hung and a reply by the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Edward Yau, in the Legislative Council today (March 17):

Question:

From January 23 to 24 this year, the Government set up a "restricted area" in Jordan, arranged for persons within the area to take a test for the Coronavirus Disease 2019 and distributed to each of them a food pack which contained four cans of canned food of different types (three of which were cans with easy-to-open covers). Those persons staying in the guesthouses within the area (including journalists) were also distributed food packs. A news report of Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) pointed out that "no can opener nor cooking implement is provided in the guesthouse", and attached a photo of a food pack in which none of the cans showed the side with a ring pull. Some members of the public have criticized that the photo, by wilfully hiding the ring pulls of the cans, misled readers into thinking that all the cans could only be opened with a can opener. RTHK issued a statement, countering the criticisms as smear accusations which it severely condemned, and insisting that the news report had stated the facts. However, a newspaper which had published a similar photo subsequently issued a statement, in which it stated that the photo concerned had been removed as the photo was misleading, admitted its oversight and made an apology. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has requested RTHK to conduct a review and submit a report on the practices adopted in the news report; if so, of the progress of the review, and whether it will submit the report to this Council; and

(2) whether RTHK issued the aforesaid statement after obtaining the approval of the then Director of Broadcasting (D of B); if so, whether the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development has requested an explanation from D of B; if so, of the justifications for giving the approval; if no approval had been obtained, whether RTHK has reviewed if the contents of the statement were appropriate; if it has, of the review outcome; if it has not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

On January 23 this year, Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) reported on the setting up of a "restricted area" in Jordan by the Government in response to the epidemic. The news report mentioned the time of condoning off, arrangements for compulsory testing, and the types and quantity of supplies distributed to people inside the condoned area. It was also stated that neither can openers nor cooking utensils were provided in the guesthouse. A photo attached to the report showed only the bottom of four cans along with

other goods, without mentioning whether any such cans were equipped with pull-open tabs.

The report has aroused public concern and there were views that the public would be misled by the news report into believing that some supplies distributed could not be used. With prior agreement of the then Director of Broadcasting, RTHK issued a statement on January 25 that it strongly condemned such smearing views, and reiterated that the news report had stated the facts. As at end-February, RTHK received a total of 548 complaints about the report.

In view of widespread public concern over the report, the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau (CEDB) has sought to gain an understanding from RTHK and requested it to handle the complaints seriously, including a review of the causes of the concern, the possibility of providing readers with more information and a more comprehensive coverage of facts at that time, so as to avoid misunderstanding and bias, or even queries about the objectivity of the report.

As a public service broadcaster and a government department, RTHK will always be accountable to society. While it is natural that there are different views on its news reports, RTHK should respond to public criticisms in a more positive and proactive manner. In order to uphold the highest professional standards of journalism as pledged in the Charter of RTHK, RTHK should first look into complaints objectively and on the basis of facts, make timely clarifications to the public, listen humbly to different views and try to better itself where there is room for improvement. RTHK should learn from experience gained in the handling of this case.

Over the past half year, CEDB has conducted an in-depth review of and made recommendations on the governance and management of RTHK. A Review Report was released in February. The Review Report pointed out that there are major deficiencies in RTHK's mechanisms for editorial management and complaints handling. RTHK will seriously follow up the recommendations of the Review Report. In the process, RTHK should seek advice from the RTHK Board of Advisors and other stakeholders. CEDB will monitor RTHK's follow-up work.