

LCQ5: Visit of Inter-departmental Counter-terrorism Unit

Following is a question by the Hon Alvin Yeung and a reply by the Secretary for Security, Mr John Lee, in the Legislative Council today (January 9):

Question:

It has been reported that some human rights organisations have alleged that the Chinese Government has set up "re-education camps" in Xinjiang for detaining about a million people from the ethnic minorities, the majority of whom are ethnic Uighurs believing in Islam. A number of ethnic Uighurs alleged that their family members, relatives and friends had lost contact with them after being taken away by public security officials for no reason. Also, some people who had been detained in such camps alleged that they had been psychologically abused and even tortured there. However, the Chinese Government has stated that the camps concerned are vocational skills training institutes established with the aim of eliminating extremism from the root and preventing the emergence of terrorism. On the other hand, there are reports that the Under Secretary for Security led a delegation to Xinjiang last month to exchange views with local officials on the work on preventing terrorist activities. Regarding the visits conducted outside Hong Kong in relation to the work on preventing terrorist activities, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the details of the aforesaid visit, including the time and location of each event on the itinerary; whether the delegation visited the "re-education camps"; if so, of the details;
- (2) of the names and post titles of the officials who proposed, arranged and participated in the visit, and set out such information by whether they work under the Government of the Hong Kong SAR or the Mainland authorities; and
- (3) of the number of visits conducted outside Hong Kong by government officials in the past five years in relation to the work on preventing terrorist activities, as well as the destination and date of each visit?

Reply:

President,

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government attaches great importance to the combat and prevention of terrorist activities, and has been assessing the threat level of Hong Kong being subject to terrorist attack. Currently, the threat level is assessed to be "moderate", indicating that there is a possibility of attack but there is no specific intelligence suggesting that Hong Kong is likely to be a target. That said, as terrorist

activities around the globe and their trend have been changing and diversified modus operandi have evolved, the HKSAR Government must stay on full alert to guard against any unexpected challenges.

HKSAR's counter-terrorism (CT) strategy are four-pronged, i.e. vigilant "prevention", adequate "preparation", prompt "response" and speedy "recovery". Under the strategy, law enforcement agencies (LEAs) strive to prevent terrorist activities in Hong Kong under an intelligence-led approach, and ensure preparedness at all times among response and emergency services, supporting personnel and other relevant parties via repeated drills and training. All departments have in place various contingency plans, which are subject to continuous review and improvement, for enhancing their capability to deal with any possible terrorist incidents.

To further strengthen Hong Kong's CT capability and preparedness, the Government set up the Inter-departmental Counter-terrorism Unit (ICTU) in April 2018, comprising members from six LEAs, namely the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF), Immigration Department (ImmD), Customs and Excise Department (C&ED), Correctional Services Department (CSD), Fire Services Department (FSD) and Government Flying Service (GFS). ICTU is tasked with monitoring the global terrorism trend and CT measures, reviewing and improving the CT strategy in Hong Kong, developing specialised CT training, optimising various contingency plans, etc. Serving as an inter-departmental CT platform on top of the original CT framework, ICTU not only fosters closer liaison and smoother collaboration among relevant departments, but also synergises CT intelligence, training, emergency response education and other related efforts, with a view to enhancing Hong Kong's overall CT deployment and preparedness.

Instead of a local challenge of any single region, CT efforts hinge on cross-boundary and international collaboration. Therefore, the HKSAR Government has been arranging representatives to visit other places from time to time to know about their practices and experience through in-depth exchange with the respective government authorities and officials. The observations from these visits serve as reference or lessons for the HKSAR Government in formulating CT policies, such as strengthening various CT measures, enhancing capability and preparedness of officers concerned, etc.

Hon Alvin Yeung has raised three questions about the visit to Xinjiang by a delegation led by the Under Secretary for Security in December 2018 for exchange with local authorities regarding efforts on preventing terrorist activities. My reply is as follows.

(1) and (2) A nine-member HKSARG delegation visited Xinjiang on December 6 to 10, 2018, with the Under Secretary for Security as the leader and one Assistant Secretary for Security and seven ICTU representatives (including one Senior Superintendent and one Senior Inspector from HKPF, one Senior Pilot from GFS, one Divisional Officer from FSD, one Principal Officer from CSD, one Assistant Superintendent from C&ED and one Chief Immigration Officer from ImmD) as members.

The trip was the first visit of ICTU outside Hong Kong, with the aim of study, exchange and understanding. Xinjiang was selected because a number of terrorist attacks took place there but the situation was brought under control and improved in recent years. ICTU was of the view that Xinjiang's CT experience could be of reference to Hong Kong in formulating and optimising our CT strategy and capability.

During the study trip in Xinjiang, ICTU visited a number of local CT units and police facilities, CT tactical training centre, security checkpoints at tourist attractions, border control points, public convenience management centres, district police stations and the police training school; and attended seminars and exchanged views with local officials. The itinerary did not include the "vocational skills training institutes" as mentioned in the question.

(3) From time to time, major LEAs on CT (including HKPF) in the Government have maintained exchange with counterparts outside Hong Kong on prevention of terrorist activities and law enforcement, and enhancing officers' knowledge and skills on the operational level via mutual visits. During every visit, departmental representatives will, apart from understanding the practices and experience of other places, introduce Hong Kong's latest development and work in various areas, with a view to expanding and enhancing liaison and co-operation between Hong Kong and other places in different related fields. As the itinerary of each visit covers different subjects and content, we have not kept statistics on individual subjects and therefore do not have the information as requested in part (3) of the question. In addition to the Mainland, some destinations of previous visits outside Hong Kong involving CT include the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Germany and Indonesia, etc.

President, relevant departments have to make reference to the experience and latest development of other places in order to effectively support our disciplined services in their multi-faceted law enforcement on CT and different related aspects. For example, the Police have in recent years vigorously strengthened training of frontline officers on Immediate Tactical Intervention to ensure that those arriving earliest at the scene are capable of making swift responses to provide members of the public with immediate care for the sake of their safety; ImmD and C&ED have been closely monitoring the latest intelligence in various places and have implemented immigration and import/export control under a professional and risk-based approach to intercept persons and cargoes suspected of involving terrorist activities; and CSD has stepped up efforts of CT work in penal institutions having regard to experience in other places.

Besides, taking account of and in response to the latest trends in terrorist attacks worldwide, LEAs have been examining the procurement of suitable equipment, such as the Police's modular vehicle barrier and radiological detector as well as C&ED's ion scanner and portable spectroscopic equipment, so as to enhance the tactics or upgrade the equipment commonly employed for preventing and detecting terrorist attacks.

As always, the HKSAR Government endeavours to maintain Hong Kong as one of the safest cities in the world. We will stay vigilant for proactive prevention and keep enhancing Hong Kong's CT capability and preparedness to ensure a long-term safe environment in our city. ICTU will actively monitor measures adopted by other regions which are exposed to higher risks, while paying close attention and making reference to the latest advice or guidance and news released by different international organisations, with a view to continuously enhancing Hong Kong's CT capability.

Thank you, President.