

LCQ6: Promoting Halal-certified diet to develop tourism

Following is a question by the Hon Edward Leung and a reply by the Secretary for Culture, Sports and Tourism, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (January 31):

Question:

There are views pointing out that in terms of receiving Muslim travellers mainly from Middle East countries and promoting the Halal food culture, Hong Kong compares unfavourably with the Mainland and even neighbouring countries or regions. According to the information from the Hong Kong Tourism Board, only 80-odd restaurants are Halal-certified in Hong Kong. It is learnt that many Middle East travellers do not choose to visit Hong Kong because of Hong Kong's failure to cater for their Halal dietary needs. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has studied the proportion of the number of travellers from Middle East countries visiting Hong Kong in the total number of travellers visiting Hong Kong in each of the past 10 years, as well as the trend of change in such proportion; if so, of the outcomes;

(2) whether it has implemented official Halal diet certification measures to assist Muslim travellers in meeting their dietary needs; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; as it is learnt that at present, most hotels do not provide their guests with Halal-certified food choices and, as a result, Muslim travellers face dietary difficulties even at their places of accommodation, whether the authorities will consider how to proactively support the hotel industry in satisfying the dietary needs of the Muslim traveller market; and

(3) whether the Government will proactively play the role of a promoter, e.g. requiring the future Day and Night Vibes activities and food expos to be held in venues such as the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, the AsiaWorld-Expo and Victoria Park to have a specified proportion of booths for promoting Halal-certified food?

Reply:

President,

In terms of visitor source markets, the Middle East markets including Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, etc, are source markets with potentials. The Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) has been actively promoting in the Muslim source markets and invited media representatives from Muslim regions to come to Hong Kong to visit local "Muslim-friendly" establishments. The Muslim familiarisation trip organised in September last year showed the incoming

trade that Hong Kong welcomes and is suitable for Muslim visitors. In addition, the HKTB also consolidated a series of information about Hong Kong on its DiscoverHongKong.com website for Muslim visitors, ranging from cuisine, hotel accommodation, local culture to activities suitable for Muslim visitors, etc, to attract them to visit Hong Kong and enhance their travel experience in Hong Kong.

In respect of the question raised by the Hon Edward Leung, having consulted the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau, Environment and Ecology Bureau and Home and Youth Affairs Bureau, the reply is as follows:

(1) According to the data from the Immigration Department, visitor arrivals from Middle East countries to Hong Kong ranged from around 140 000 and 190 000 annually from 2014 to 2019, accounting for around 0.3 per cent and 1.3 per cent of total visitor arrivals and non-Mainland visitor arrivals respectively. From 2020 to 2022, due to the severe blow dealt by the pandemic, visitor arrivals from Middle East countries plummeted to around 300 in 2021 and around 2 800 in 2022. In 2023, with the resumption of cross-border travel since February, visitor arrivals from Middle East countries picked up to 58 500, accounting for around 0.2 per cent and 0.8 per cent of the total visitor arrivals and non-Mainland visitor arrivals respectively. With the gradual resumption of flights between Middle East countries and Hong Kong, the number of visitors from Middle East countries are expected to increase this year.

The HKTB will continue its promotional work on various fronts, such as organising briefings to introduce new tourism products to local travel trade, promoting special tourism offers on Hong Kong and launching travel packages in collaboration with tourism brands, with a view to attracting visitors from the Middle East to visit Hong Kong.

(2) The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) is not responsible for handling Halal food certification. According to the Environment and Ecology Bureau, the FEHD is responsible for food business licenses or related permits. Their main considerations when processing applications are to ensure the environmental hygiene, building and fire safety of the premises, and that the food prepared and sold must comply with legal requirements related to food safety. Religious factor is not the FEHD's consideration in the approval of licenses or permits.

Nonetheless, the Incorporated Trustees of the Islamic Community Fund of Hong Kong provides Halal certification for many restaurants in Hong Kong. The HKTB has also consolidated a list of restaurants suitable for Muslim visitors on DiscoverHongKong.com website according to relevant information.

As regards hotels, hotels in Hong Kong will, having regard to the needs of their business development and visitors, provide visitors with appropriate facilities and services, including Halal-certified food. As far as we understand, some hotels are equipped with prayer rooms or provide indication of the Qibla direction in their guest rooms, and provide prayer mats and Quran, etc, according to the needs of their visitors. In addition, some

hotels would provide their staff with training in Arabic culture or arrange staff speaking Arabian to serve visitors from Middle East countries. The HKTB has gathered and posted the relevant information at its website.

The HKTB has also invited the Incorporated Trustees of the Islamic Community Fund of Hong Kong to conduct briefings for the travel and related trades to introduce the requirements of Muslim visitors for food, accommodation and facilities of attractions, thereby assisting relevant trades in offering more Halal-friendly experience. The HKTB will continue to communicate with the travel and related trades to promote relevant work, with a view to providing more restaurants, hotel accommodations, travel activity options, etc suitable for Muslim visitors so as to attract them to visit Hong Kong and enhance their travel experience.

(3) According to the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau, the Hong Kong Trade Development Council's annual Food Expo PRO, held concurrently with the Food Expo, brings together a wide range of high-quality products. The Halal food and beverage zone displays related food and beverages, Halal production technologies, machinery and related services, logistics management and transport services, utensils and food packaging services, as well as testing and certification of Halal standards. Industry experts are also invited to explain Halal food certification and analyse market opportunities in seminars at the Expo, to comprehensively promote Halal market opportunities. In addition, other food exhibitions held in Hong Kong have their own characteristics, attracting not only the public, but also tourists. We will encourage food fairs to sell a variety of food products to cater for customers with different needs.

For the series of "Day x Night Vibes @ 18 Districts" activities being organised by the Government in the first half of this year, Home and Youth Affairs Bureau remarked that the activities mainly aim to provide the public with a wide range of cultural and leisure events, and to showcase the diversity of district characteristics or traditional cultural connotations in various districts. Given their diversified characteristics, there is no specific standardised arrangement in place for the food in the activities.

The Government will continue to maintain close communication with the travel trade to understand their needs in serving the Muslim visitors market. The HKTB will also continue its multi-faceted publicity and work with the industry to develop more unique tourism products and experience to promote Hong Kong's tourism appeal to the Middle East markets and attract visitors.

Thank you, President.