

## LCQ8: Promoting Hong Kong to Arab States of Gulf

Following is a question by the Hon Holden Chow and a written reply by the Acting Secretary for Culture, Sports and Tourism, Mr Raistlin Lau, in the Legislative Council today (Mar 20):

Question:

The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) is one of Hong Kong's important trading and investment partners, and its six member states (namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)) are home to over 50 million people. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of travellers coming from the member states of GCC to Hong Kong in each of the past 10 years;

(2) of the details of the authorities' effort to publicise Hong Kong to the member states of GCC in the past two years, including the advertisements placed and promotional activities organized;

(3) whether it knows the activities organised by the representative office set up by the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) in Dubai, UAE for publicising Hong Kong in the past two years, and the existing channels mainly through which the representative office publicises Hong Kong to the local residents;

(4) whether it knows if the HKTB has plans to upgrade its representative office in Dubai to a worldwide office; if it has, of the details;

(5) whether it has compiled statistics on the number of students coming from the member states of GCC to study in Hong Kong in each of the past five years; and

(6) whether specific measures or plans are in place to attract students from the member states of GCC to study in Hong Kong; if so, of the details?

Reply:

President,

In respect of the question raised by the Hon Holden Chow, having consulted the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau (CEDB), the Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau (FSTB) and the Education Bureau, the reply is as follows:

(1) According to the figures provided by the Immigration Department, visitor arrivals from the six member states of the Cooperation Council for the Arab

States of the Gulf (GCC) (namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)) to Hong Kong ranged from around 33 000 and 49 000 annually from 2014 to 2019. Following the resumption of cross-border travel since February 2023, visitor arrivals from GCC member states last year was around 16 000. With the gradual resumption of flights between GCC member states and Hong Kong, the number of visitors from GCC member states is expected to increase this year.

(2) to (4) Bureaux and departments of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government carry out publicity and promotion activities targeting GCC member states in many different areas including economics, finance, environmental protection, culture and art, tourism, etc, in order to promote exchanges in various aspects and enhance economic benefits.

On the economic front, the CEDB remarked that their Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in Dubai (Dubai ETO) has actively forged closer ties with the six GCC member states over the past two years, meeting with government officials relevant to commerce and trade, chambers of commerce, business organisations and individuals, and hosting various events to promote Hong Kong's unique business advantages and investment opportunities under the "one country, two systems", as well as Hong Kong's culture, arts and creative industries, thereby further enhancing Hong Kong's international status. The Dubai ETO also arranged media personnel in the region to visit Hong Kong under the Sponsored Journalists Programme to cover major events such as the Asian Financial Forum, EdTech Month Summit, Hong Kong Arbitration Week, and Hong Kong FinTech Week, so as to deepen the understanding of Hong Kong's actual situation by various sectors in the aforementioned six member states. In addition, the Dubai ETO regularly posts on social media platforms to promote the HKSAR Government's latest policies on commerce, economy and investment, Hong Kong's business environment, activities participated and/or organised by the ETO, as well as Hong Kong's tourism attractions. The Information Services Department also promotes Hong Kong by publishing print advertorials and placing online advertisements on media outlets in the Middle East, working with individual newspapers to produce online and social media contents as well as placing advertisements in the international airports in the region.

The Dubai ETO also, in conjunction with relevant departments, initiated and co-ordinated visits by Principal Officials of the HKSAR Government to countries under its purview, such as the high-level business delegation to Saudi Arabia and the UAE led by the Chief Executive in February 2023 to promote to the local political and business sectors the unique advantages of Hong Kong, which include its role as the key link for the country's Belt and Road (B&R) Initiative, its status as an international trade centre as well as the immense opportunities brought by the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. During the visit, Hong Kong signed a total of 13 high-quality Memoranda of Understanding or Letters of Intent with various enterprises and organisations of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, laying a solid foundation for the long-term development of Hong Kong businesses in the Middle East region while attracting its local companies and capital to invest in Hong Kong. Relevant Hong Kong enterprises and organisations have maintained close liaison with

these local contacts, with the conclusion of additional 16 co-operation initiatives after the visit.

Riding on the fruitful outcomes of the Chief Executive's visit to the Middle East region, Hong Kong held the 8th Belt and Road Summit (the Summit) under the theme of "Prospering on a Decade of Collaboration" on September 13 and 14, 2023, with the addition of the Middle East Forum which was well attended by the representatives of key enterprises in addition to government representatives from the Middle East countries. Through the project investment sessions focusing on Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the emerging markets, some 50 investment/co-operation projects in the Middle East region were explored. During the Summit, a total of 21 Memoranda of Understanding or Letters of Intent were signed, six of which are related to the Middle East region, covering various areas such as sustainable energy and construction resources as well as research and development. These collaboration initiatives have paved the groundwork for further co-operation with the Middle East markets.

Invest Hong Kong also proactively organised and participated in various investment promotion events in the six GCC member states, including the Single Family Offices Leaders Forum and Opportunity Asia – Destination Hong Kong: Growth Opportunities in the New Era held in Dubai, the Global Family Office Roundtable held in Jeddah, the Web Summit Qatar held in Doha, among others.

In terms of financial and environmental co-operation, the FSTB and the Environment and Ecology Bureau joined the Chinese delegation to attend the 28th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28) in Dubai from late November to early December 2023. The Financial Services Development Council (FSDC) and the Friends of the Earth (HK) co-hosted a side event forum titled "Hong Kong's Drive Towards Green and Sustainable Development and Cutting-Edge Innovations" at the China Pavilion at COP28. The FSTB attended the forum and delivered a keynote speech to showcase to the participants the unique role of Hong Kong in leading the regional green development as well as how to leverage on the strengths of green finance in jointly building a sustainable future. The FSDC has also established research collaboration with the Financial Sector Development Program (FSDP) in Saudi Arabia in 2023, and signed a memorandum of understanding with the FSDP at the Asian Financial Forum in January 2024 to signify the bilateral co-operation.

In terms of tourism, GCC member states including Saudi Arabia, UAE, etc, are potential visitor source markets. Through its representative office in Dubai, the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTb) engages local tourism professionals for marketing and publicity. This arrangement of having a representative office offers flexibility and efficiency.

In 2022, the HKTb partnered with the Dubai ETO and the Hong Kong Trade Development Council to promote Hong Kong tourism at a local dinner reception celebrating the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the HKSAR. During the reception, the HKTb leveraged on advanced technology to promote Hong Kong

as a leisure travel destination, and deepen the understanding of new markets in the Middle East, including setting up a kiosk making use of virtual reality (VR) technology and giving away VR headsets.

In tandem with the reopening of Hong Kong's tourism and the launch of the "Hello Hong Kong" large-scale global promotion campaign, the HKTb rolled out various kinds of promotion around the world. For instance, the HKTb organised briefings in the Middle East to introduce new tourism products to the local travel trade, promoted special Hong Kong tourism offers, and rolled out travel packages in collaboration with various tourism brands to attract visitors from the Middle East to visit Hong Kong.

In February this year, the HKTb demonstrated Hong Kong's traditional culture and tourism appeal through a series of promotions, including souvenir handouts and dragon dance performances in a Dragon Boat event in Dubai. In a dinner reception held by the Dubai ETO, the HKTb showcased the city's appeal through a promotional video.

In addition, the HKTb partners with travel agents in these markets to launch travel packages and promotes new tourism products about Hong Kong through social media, blogs, electronic direct mail, etc, to encourage bookings for visits to Hong Kong by visitors. The HKTb also participated in various business-to-business meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions events and exhibitions, including the Meetings Arabia and Luxury Travel (MALT) Congress, the Kingdom Business Luxury Travel (KBLT) Congress, etc, to connect with the travel trade in these markets, introduce Hong Kong as a travel destination to them, and showcase the city's tourism appeal.

The HKTb will also team up with airlines to offer travel packages to visitor segments with different spending power. The HKTb will also host familiarisation trips for the travel trade, media and key opinion leaders (KOLs) from these markets to enable them to experience Hong Kong first-hand.

The HKTb, together with more than 20 travel trade representatives, will soon participate in the Arabian Travel Market, a leading travel trade exhibition in the Middle East. The event will be held in May this year in Dubai and is expected to attract about 40 000 visitors. The HKTb will set up a dedicated Hong Kong pavilion to promote Hong Kong's tourism offerings and experiences.

Looking ahead, the HKTb will continue to promote Hong Kong in the region. Riding on a series of international art and cultural events to be held in Hong Kong and various Chinese and Western festivities, the HKTb will partner with local media to target and attract young and family travellers through various contents and videos on social media.

Apart from conducting promotions in the area, the HKTb has been inviting 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. 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 the city.

(5) In the 2019/20 to 2023/24 academic years, the numbers of non-local students from GCC member states pursuing the University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded programmes are set out in the following table:

Academic year	Non-local students from GCC member states
2019/20	1
2020/21	1
2021/22	2
2022/23	4
2023/24 (provisional figures)	3

Note: The above numbers refer to the countries of origin of the non-local students, i.e. their nationalities or residing locations.

(6) The Chief Executive proposed in the 2023 Policy Address to develop Hong Kong into an international post-secondary education hub. To this end, the Government is stepping up efforts in promoting the internationalisation and diversity of the post-secondary education sector of Hong Kong, so as to attract outstanding non-local students (including those from GCC member states) to study in Hong Kong. Measures include increasing the admission quota of non-local students to Government-funded post-secondary institutions, expanding the quotas of scholarship schemes, including the B&R Scholarship and The Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme, etc. In addition, the eight UGC-funded universities have established the Heads of Universities Committee Standing Committee on Internationalisation (HUCOMSCI) and conducted overseas recruitment activities and exhibitions together under the brand of "Study in Hong Kong". To strengthen the promotion of Hong Kong's higher education along the countries of the B&R initiative, the UGC has allocated around \$10 million in the 2022-25 triennium for the HUCOMSCI to commence a new project to formulate the promotion strategy targeting these countries, produce publicity publications and short videos, etc. In tandem, the Education Bureau and the UGC Secretariat have also advised the UGC-funded universities that in order to support the development of Hong Kong into an international post-secondary education hub, the universities should provide more suitable campus facilities and catering services to support students of different religions, languages, customs and cultures, as well as tending to their needs at social and personal levels, thereby enhancing the support for non-local students in various aspects as far as practicable.