

Nineteen immigration offenders arrested

The Immigration Department (ImmD) mounted a series of territory-wide anti-illegal worker operations, including one codenamed "Twilight" and joint operations with the Hong Kong Police Force codenamed "Champion" and "Powerplayer", from March 18 to 20. A total of 17 illegal workers, one suspected employer and one overstayer were arrested.

During operation "Twilight", ImmD Task Force officers raided 18 target locations including commercial buildings, a construction site, a market, massage parlours, restaurants and a shopping mall. Six illegal workers and one employer were arrested. The illegal workers comprised two men and four women, aged 24 to 46. Among them, one man and one woman were holders of recognisance forms, which prohibit them from taking any employment. Meanwhile, one woman, aged 32, was suspected of employing the illegal workers.

In addition, during operation "Champion", enforcement officers raided eight target locations in Mong Kok and Tsing Yi including a car park, a restaurant and warehouses. Three illegal workers were arrested. The illegal workers comprised two men and one woman, aged 34 to 55. Among them, one man was a holder of a recognisance form, which prohibits him from taking any employment. One male overstayer, aged 37, was also arrested.

Furthermore, during operation "Powerplayer", enforcement officers raided nine target locations in Tin Shui Wai and Yuen Long districts including factories, recycling sites and scrap yards. Eight illegal workers were arrested. The illegal workers comprised eight men, aged 32 to 41. All of them were holders of recognisance forms, which prohibit them from taking any employment.

"Any person who contravenes a condition of stay in force in respect of him shall be guilty of an offence. Also, visitors are not allowed to take employment in Hong Kong, whether paid or unpaid, without the permission of the Director of Immigration. Offenders are liable to prosecution and upon conviction face a maximum fine of \$50,000 and up to two years' imprisonment. Aiders and abettors are also liable to prosecution and penalties," an ImmD spokesman said.

The spokesman warned that, as stipulated in section 38AA of the Immigration Ordinance, illegal immigrants or people who are the subject of a removal order or a deportation order are prohibited from taking any employment, whether paid or unpaid, or establishing or joining in any business. Offenders are liable upon conviction to a maximum fine of \$50,000 and up to three years' imprisonment. The Court of Appeal has issued a guideline ruling that a sentence of 15 months' imprisonment should be applied in such cases.

The spokesman reiterated that it is a serious offence to employ people who are not lawfully employable. The maximum penalty is imprisonment for

three years and a fine of \$350,000. The High Court has laid down sentencing guidelines that the employer of an illegal worker should be given an immediate custodial sentence. According to court sentencing, employers must take all practicable steps to determine whether a person is lawfully employable prior to employment. Apart from inspecting a prospective employee's identity card, the employer has the explicit duty to make enquiries regarding the person and ensure that the answers would not cast any reasonable doubt concerning the lawful employability of the person. The court will not accept failure to do so as a defence in proceedings. It is also an offence if an employer fails to inspect the job seeker's valid travel document if the job seeker does not have a Hong Kong permanent identity card. The maximum penalty for failing to inspect such a document is imprisonment for one year and a fine of \$150,000.

Under the existing mechanism, the ImmD will, as a standard procedure, conduct initial screening of vulnerable persons, including illegal workers, illegal immigrants, sex workers and foreign domestic helpers, who are arrested during any operation with a view to ascertaining whether they are trafficking in persons (TIP) victims. When any TIP indicator is revealed in the initial screening, the officers will conduct a full debriefing and identification by using a standardised checklist to ascertain the presence of TIP elements, such as threat and coercion in the recruitment phase and the nature of exploitation. Identified TIP victims will be provided with various forms of support and assistance, including urgent interference, medical services, counselling, shelter, temporary accommodation and other supporting services. The ImmD calls on TIP victims to report crimes to the relevant departments.