

Ombudsman probes Government's monitoring and regulation of slope safety (with photo)

The following is issued on behalf of the Office of The Ombudsman:

The Ombudsman, Mr Jack Chan, today (November 14) announced the launch of a direct investigation operation to examine the Government's monitoring and regulation of slope safety in detail.

The total land area of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region exceeds 1 100 square kilometres, of which over 60 per cent is covered by natural hillsides. In addition, there are about 61 000 man-made slopes, including some 38 500 government man-made slopes, 15 800 private man-made slopes and 6 300 slopes involving mixed responsibilities. Seasonal heavy rain and severe storms may lead to landslides from time to time, thereby posing threats to life and property. Over the past 30 years, there has been an annual average of about 300 landslides recorded in Hong Kong. While there has been a downward trend in the number of landslides in recent years, severe landslides triggered by extreme weather might still occur, creating serious incidents. In 2023 alone, the number of landslides exceeded 600, raising alarms in the community.

Currently, the monitoring and regulation of slope safety falls within the ambit of various government departments. The Lands Department (LandsD) is responsible for determining the maintenance responsibility of man-made slopes, categorised into government and private man-made slopes respectively, while some are slopes involving mixed responsibilities. Every year, the Geotechnical Engineering Office (GEO) of the Civil Engineering and Development Department (CEDD) selects natural hillside catchments and government man-made slopes with relatively high potential impacts for upgrading or risk mitigation works according to a risk-based approach. The GEO also conducts safety screening studies for private man-made slopes and recommends to the Buildings Department (BD) the issuance of Dangerous Hillside Orders to the owners of slopes with potential dangers requiring them to carry out remedial or preventive works. Preliminary findings of the Office of The Ombudsman revealed that between 2014 and 2022, the GEO completed risk mitigation works for over 300 natural hillside catchments, upgraded over 1 400 government man-made slopes and conducted safety screening studies for more than 900 private man-made slopes. Different government departments (mainly the LandsD, the Highways Department (HyD), the Water Supplies Department (WSD) and the Architectural Services Department (ArchSD) are responsible for the routine inspection and maintenance of man-made slopes under their purview.

Lack of maintenance on slopes is one of the major causes of landslides. Government information showed that both government and private man-made slopes were involved in past landslides, while more severe incidents mainly

concerned natural hillside catchments. Preliminary findings of the Office also revealed that a considerable number of Dangerous Hillside Orders issued to private owners have remained long outstanding, with disputes over the maintenance responsibility being one of the common causes. In addition, the Office has received almost 20 complaints related to slope safety over the past five years, reflecting considerable public concerns about slope safety.

Mr Chan said, "With the Government's continuous efforts over the past few decades, overall slope safety in Hong Kong has been substantially uplifted compared with the 1970s. However, as extreme weather has become more frequent, coupled with gradual slope degradation, landslide risks still exist. To this end, I have decided to launch a direct investigation operation to seriously examine whether there is room for further enhancement of the Government's monitoring and regulation of slope safety, including the overall strategy on landslip prevention and mitigation, the routine repair and maintenance of government man-made slopes, the issuance and subsequent enforcement of Dangerous Hillside Orders, the determination of slope maintenance responsibility and dispute handling, post-landslide follow-up actions, as well as interdepartmental collaboration covering case referral, exchange of information and professional knowledge, with a view to making targeted recommendations to the Government for improvement where necessary."

The Office will probe the CEDD, the BD, the LandsD, the HyD, the WSD and the ArchSD in this direct investigation operation. The Ombudsman welcomes views from members of the public on this topic. Written submissions should reach the Office of The Ombudsman by December 13, 2024:

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