

Six illegal workers jailed

Six illegal workers comprising four Vietnamese and two Bangladeshis were jailed by Shatin Magistrates' Courts yesterday (December 6).

During joint operations conducted by the Immigration Department (ImmD) and the Hong Kong Police Force codenamed "Champion" on February 6, enforcement officers raided a car park in Kwai Chung. Two male Bangladeshi illegal workers, aged 35 and 46, were arrested. When intercepted they were conveying goods. Upon identity checking, they produced for inspection recognisance forms issued by the ImmD, which prohibit them from taking employment. Further investigation revealed that they were non-refoulement claimants. An employer suspected of employing the illegal workers was arrested and the investigation is ongoing.

In addition, during operation "Twilight" on December 4, ImmD investigators raided restaurants in Fanling and Sai Wan Ho. Two male and two female Vietnamese illegal workers, aged 27 to 47, were arrested. When intercepted they were washing dishes. Upon identity checking, one man produced for inspection a recognisance form issued by the ImmD, which prohibits him from taking employment. Further investigation revealed that he was a non-refoulement claimant. Furthermore, one man and two women were also suspected of using and being in possession of a forged identity card. In addition, one man was also suspected of using and being in possession of a false instrument. Two employers suspected of employing the illegal workers were arrested and the investigation is ongoing.

The six illegal workers were charged at Shatin Magistrates' Courts yesterday with taking employment after landing in Hong Kong unlawfully and remaining in Hong Kong without the authority of the Director of Immigration or while being a person in respect of whom a removal order or deportation order was in force. They were sentenced to imprisonment ranging from 15 months to 22 months and two weeks. In addition, one male and two female Vietnamese illegal workers were also charged with one count of using a forged Hong Kong identity card and were sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment. All sentences are to run concurrently, making a total of 18 months' imprisonment. In addition, one male Vietnamese was also charged with one count of possessing false instrument and was sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment of which part of the sentence is to run consecutively, making a total of 17 months' imprisonment.

The ImmD 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. It is an offence to use or possess a forged Hong Kong identity

card or a Hong Kong identity card related to another person. Offenders are liable to prosecution and a maximum penalty of a \$100,000 fine and up to 10 years' imprisonment.

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 the 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.