

LCQ2: Members of public being lured to overseas to engage in illegal work

Following is a question by the Hon Yung Hoi-yan and a reply by the Acting Secretary for Security, Mr Michael Cheuk, in the Legislative Council today (February 12):

Question:

It has been reported that recently, a number of cases have occurred involving members of the public suspected of being lured to Southeast Asian countries and detained to engage in illegal work (cases of luring and detention). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of suspected cases of luring and detention received by the Government in each month of the past two years, as well as the following information on each case: the countries involved; the respective numbers of persons who were lured and successfully rescued; the longest period of detention; the respective numbers of persons arrested, prosecuted and successfully convicted in the cases concerned; and the penalties imposed on the convicted persons;

(2) as it has been reported that the Security Bureau dedicated task force met with officials of the relevant law enforcement agencies in Thailand earlier on to exchange views on further strengthening co-operation in combating cross-border crimes, such as telecommunications and online frauds as well as human trafficking, of the Government's plans in place to enhance collaboration with other law enforcement agencies in the region, including co-operation in law enforcement and exchange of information; and

(3) given that the modus operandi of fraudsters is changing constantly, whether the Government has plans to enhance publicity and education work focusing on the fraudsters' latest modus operandi, so that members of the public will step up the protection for themselves and stay vigilant; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Security Bureau (SB) has always attached great importance to cases where Hong Kong residents are suspected of being lured to Southeast Asian countries and detained to engage in illegal work, and has established a dedicated task force in August 2022 to co-ordinate follow-up work on the cases by relevant law enforcement agencies (LEAs), including the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) and the Immigration Department (ImmD), with a view to providing all practicable assistance to assistance seekers.

Since the second quarter of 2024, there have been signs of a resurgence in the situation where Hong Kong residents are suspected of being lured to Southeast Asian countries and detained to engage in illegal work. In view of recent developments, I led the dedicated task force comprising members from the SB, the HKPF and the ImmD to Bangkok, Thailand last month. The dedicated task force met with senior officials including the Minister of Justice (MoJ) of Thailand, Mr Tawee Sodsong, who is a member of the Anti-Trafficking-in-Persons Committee chaired by the Prime Minister of Thailand, and the heads of the enforcement departments under the MoJ, as well as the Royal Thai Police, to further follow up on related cases.

The dedicated task force reflected the situation regarding relevant request-for-assistance cases, exchanged intelligence and discussed strengthening collaboration, with a view to assisting safe and early return of assistance seekers to Hong Kong as soon as possible. The Thailand authorities demonstrated great importance to the assistance cases and offered positive feedback. Moreover, the Thailand authorities expressed that they would further strengthen the prevention and combat of transnational crimes, and exchanged views on further strengthening co-operation and communication, as well as jointly combating cross-border crimes such as telecommunications, online fraud and human trafficking.

Members of the dedicated task force were sent again to Thailand by the SB in late January 2025 to co-ordinate with various units, and held meetings with the Deputy Commissioner of the Immigration Bureau of the Royal Thai Police, Mr Phanthana Nuchanart, and the Director of Special Investigation and the Director of Human Trafficking under the MoJ of Thailand, with a view to arranging the return of the rescued Hong Kong residents as soon as possible. They will continue to actively assist and follow up on all relevant request-for-assistance cases of Hong Kong residents who have yet to return, striving for their return to Hong Kong as soon as possible.

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Yung Hoi-yan is as follows:

(1) From 2023 to January 2025, the LEAs have received a total of 28 request-for-assistance cases (each case involves one victim) in relation to Hong Kong residents alleged to have been detained in Southeast Asian countries and not being able to leave. Among them, 19 have already returned to Hong Kong. As for the remaining nine persons, we believe that eight are in Myanmar while one is in Cambodia. The dedicated task force will continue to follow up and provide appropriate and practicable assistance to the assistance seekers or their families. The monthly breakdown of the number of request-for-assistance cases received by the LEAs, the countries involved, and the number of persons who have returned to Hong Kong are at Annex.

As regards Hong Kong, from 2023 to January 2025, the HKPF arrested a total of 11 persons in connection with this type of job scam cases where victims were lured to Southeast Asian countries and detained to engage in illegal work, for offences such as conspiracy to defraud, money laundering and obtaining property by deception. Besides, during the same period, two

persons, who were arrested in 2022, were charged with conspiracy to defraud and convicted, and sentenced to 36 months' and 56 months' imprisonment respectively.

(2) After I led the dedicated task force comprising members from the SB, the HKPF and the ImmD to Bangkok, Thailand to meet with Thai authorities last month, the dedicated task force has established direct contacts with relevant Thai authorities to enhance future communication and exchange of intelligence, with a view to following up on the cases more effectively. Moreover, the ImmD will continue to maintain close contact with the Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and the Chinese diplomatic and consular missions there to actively follow up on the cases.

Meanwhile, the Secretary for Security also met with the Consuls-General of Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia in Hong Kong in mid-January 2025 to exchange views, share information and discuss strengthening future follow-up work. The SB received positive feedback from the Consuls-General during the meetings with all parties expressing hope to assist more assistance seekers in returning to Hong Kong safely as soon as possible.

(3) Since 2022, the HKPF has noticed the modus operandi of the scams and started broadcasting anti-fraud videos through various channels and platforms to remind residents of the prevalent modus operandi of scams and to exercise caution in order to avoid those scams. In view of the recent cases, the Government will continue to strengthen publicity, including promotion on social media platforms, distributing the "anti-scam" leaflets to travellers heading to Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia at the departure level of the Hong Kong International Airport, and through media reports, etc. In light of cases where the suspects met the victims in bars and entertainment establishments, the HKPF has also sent officers to distribute leaflets in various bar districts and entertainment establishments.

Moreover, in view of recent developments and having regard to the latest situation of relevant countries, the SB raised the Outbound Travel Alert (OTA) level for south-eastern regions of Myanmar on January 17, 2025, including Myawaddy district, Hpapun district, Hpa-An district and Kawkaik district, to red, while maintaining an amber OTA for the rest of the country. The SB also updated the OTA webpage on the same day regarding supplementary information for Cambodia with a view to reminding residents to exercise caution and beware of overseas job scams. Besides, the SB has put on alerts on overseas job scams under the Other Travel Information section of the OTA webpage, urging residents to pay extra attention to online recruitment advertisements or comments and exercise due caution against claims of ways to earn money quickly and jobs offering extraordinarily high remuneration without specific requirements for academic qualification or working experience.

Thank you, President.