

LCQ20: Combating thefts on board aircraft

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Kennedy Wong and a written reply by the Secretary for Security, Mr Tang Ping-keung, in the Legislative Council today (December 4):

Question:

It has been reported that in the first eight months of this year, a total of 132 theft cases occurred on board aircraft to Hong Kong, representing a drastic 164 per cent increase over the same period of last year. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the following information in respect of board aircraft theft cases that occurred in the first eight months of this year: the major flight routes involved, the value of the stolen properties, the number of persons arrested, the nationalities of the persons arrested, and the penalties imposed on the convicted persons;

(2) whether the authorities have looked into the reasons for the upsurge in the number of board aircraft theft cases, and what actions and measures have been taken to prevent the occurrence of such theft cases;

(3) whether the authorities will make good use of technology (e.g. facial recognition technology), require Hong Kong-based airlines to install closed-circuit television (CCTV) in the cabins of their aircraft, as well as deploy security guards on board their flights, so as to combat thefts on board aircraft; and

(4) whether the Government will co-operate with airlines to enhance training for air crew members, as well as adopt more ways to widely educate and publicise among members of the public, so as to raise the awareness of air crew members and members of the public of the prevention of theft cases on board aircraft; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Hong Kong Police Force (the Police) have all along been paying close attention to and seriously combatting thefts on board aircraft. Apart from publicity and education, the Police have maintained close co-operation with the airport community to raise crime prevention awareness. Meanwhile, the Police have also strengthened intelligence gathering and adopted a multi-pronged strategy to curb and combat thefts on board aircraft.

The reply to the Member's question is as follows:

(1) Regarding the 169 theft cases that occurred on the Hong Kong-bound flights between January and October 2024, about 70 per cent were short-haul flights arriving from Southeast Asia, with the main places of departure including Malaysia, Thailand, India and Vietnam; about 20 per cent were flights from the Middle East, departing from Dubai, Turkey and Doha; seven per cent were flights from the Mainland China, Japan and South Korea; and the remaining three per cent were flights from the United States, Canada, Australia and Switzerland. The stolen property consisted mostly of cash in various currencies, expensive jewellery, watches and credit cards, with a total value of about HK\$4.32 million.

From January to October 2024, the Police arrested four persons of Chinese nationality on suspicion of theft on board aircraft. One of the arrested persons is on remand pending trial, while another has been released on bail pending further investigation. For the remaining two cases, since there was insufficient evidence or the witnesses were unwilling to return to Hong Kong to testify, the charges against the arrested persons were withdrawn after consultation with the Department of Justice.

(2) According to the Police records, the figures of thefts occurring on the flights to Hong Kong from 2018 to October 2024 are as follows:

| Year | No. of cases |
|---------------------------------|--------------|
| 2018 | 103 |
| 2019 | 147 |
| 2020 | 10 |
| 2021 | 0 |
| 2022 | 3 |
| 2023 | 92 |
| 2024 from January to October | 169 |

The table above shows that in both 2018 and 2019, over a hundred theft cases on board aircraft were recorded, while the number dropped to single digits during the pandemic. With the easing of the pandemic, Hong Kong resumed normal cross-boundary travel in early 2023. Air traffic has recovered steadily with a drastic increase in the number of flights and inbound travellers. The number of theft cases on board aircraft have also recorded a significant increase in 2024, which might be due to the fact that the Police have stepped up publicity to encourage more people to report crimes, or the overall economic situation.

To prevent and combat thefts on board aircraft, the Police have been maintaining close contact with airport stakeholders, including airlines, the Hong Kong Airport Authority and the Aviation Security Company Limited, to strengthen intelligence-led enforcement operations. For example, a database of suspects is set up to gather intelligence for crime analysis. Meanwhile,

intelligence exchange with airlines is stepped up to identify at an early stage the relatively high-risk routes and periods where crimes are committed. Crime prevention seminars are also held on a regular basis, reminding airlines to pay attention to these routes, and to increase the alertness among air crew in a bid to prevent crimes.

(3) Currently, there are no international policies regulating the installation of CCTV or arrangements of security staff on duty inside cabins, nor are these common practices generally adopted by airlines. With issues such as personal privacy and human resources being taken into account, these arrangements may not conform to the principle of proportionality. As such, the Government have no plans to impose requirements in this regard for the time being.

(4) The Police have been maintaining close liaison with the airlines and extending the scope of education and publicity to the general public, so as to increase the awareness of air crew and the public on prevention of thefts on board aircraft.

Specifically, from January to October 2024, the Police organised 38 seminars on topics such as thefts on board aircraft and crime prevention, explaining the crime trends and common modus operandi to a total of 937 airport stakeholders from 38 airlines, so as to heighten the vigilance and crime prevention awareness among frontline airline staff and to prevent crime at an early stage. In general, crime prevention seminars organised regularly by the Police for various sectors in the community will also include messages that remind the public to properly secure their personal belongings when travelling.

Through the regularly organised crime prevention seminars, promotional video clips and pamphlets produced by the Police are broadcast and distributed to the airport stakeholders and various sectors in the community, travellers are reminded that they should safeguard their personal belongings and should never put cash or valuables inside the overhead compartments in the cabin, so as to avoid giving chances to thieves.

In addition, news about detection of theft cases on board aircrafts are disseminated to the media by the Public Relations Wing of the Police. Along with the purpose of enhancing the travellers' alertness, this also serves to remind the public not to defy the law, and that theft is a serious crime for which offenders are liable to imprisonment for up to 10 years.

To further combat thefts on board aircraft, in addition to placing promotional leaflets at suitable locations at the airport, the Police are discussing with the airlines the launch of a new round of publicity and education and appeal for their support to convey crime prevention messages to travellers by actively broadcasting the Police's promotional video clips in-flight and placing leaflets at check-in counters. For any theft cases identified, the Police call on travellers to report as soon as possible to enable the Police to carry out investigation at the earliest.