

Opening remarks by S for S on security policy areas at LegCo Finance Committee special meeting

Following is the English translation of the opening remarks by the Secretary for Security, Mr John Lee, on security policy areas of at the special meeting of the Legislative Council Finance Committee today (April 9):

Chairman,

In the draft Estimates for the new financial year, allocation for the policy areas under the Security Bureau (SB)'s responsibility will be \$57.5 billion, accounting for 7.9 per cent of the total government expenditure.

On law and order, the operational priorities of the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) for 2020-21 are to combat violent crimes, triads, syndicated and organised crimes, dangerous drugs and "quick-cash" crimes; to promote cyber security and combat technology crimes; and to ensure public safety and step up counter-terrorism work. In view of the occurrence of over 1 400 public order events since last June, many of which turned into illegal acts of serious violence, the HKPF will enhance its readiness, combat all illegal acts of violence and safeguard public peace. We are also very concerned that violent extremists were involved in a number of bomb cases in recent months. Their behaviour was very close to terrorist attacks commonly seen overseas. The Government will be fully prepared, and will enhance public awareness of counter-terrorism and an emerging "homegrown terrorism" threat that severely endangers the personal safety of the general public.

On control points, in response to the development of the COVID-19 epidemic, the Government has, since the end of January 2020, implemented a series of measures to reduce passenger flow between Hong Kong and overseas. At this point, passenger clearance is only available at the airport and two land-based control points (i.e. Shenzhen Bay and the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge), and the operating hours of passenger clearance at the two land-based control points have also been shortened to 10 hours. At the airport, we restrict the entry of non-Hong Kong residents coming from overseas countries and regions.

After implementing a series of immigration restrictions and compulsory quarantine measures, the total number of arrivals on April 7 was 992 and on April 8 was 1 576, representing a decrease of 99.5 per cent in comparison with the figure of around 236 000 prior to the implementation of the measures.

Concerning the construction progress of the Heung Yuen Wai Boundary Control Point, its building works were largely completed in 2019 and the control point is ready for commissioning. The Government will continue to

liaise with the Guangdong authorities on the arrangement for commissioning the new control point such that the law enforcement departments can get themselves ready for the commissioning.

On non-refoulement claims, since the commencement of the comprehensive review of the strategy of handling non-refoulement claims in 2016, various measures have yielded considerable results. The number of non-ethnic Chinese illegal immigrants has dropped by over 80 per cent, and the number of new claims has also dropped by over 80 per cent. The Immigration Department (ImmD) has basically completed the screening of the backlog claims. The number of appeal cases pending the Torture Claims Appeal Board's handling has also dropped significantly to below 3 000, which are expected to be completed in the first half of next year at the soonest. ImmD will also expedite the removal of unsubstantiated claimants from Hong Kong.

The Government consulted the Legislative Council (LegCo) Panel on Security on the proposed amendments to the Immigration Ordinance in 2018 and 2019, and exchanged views with relevant stakeholders (including the two legal professional bodies). Meanwhile, we also commenced drafting of the amendment bill. Taking into account the situation of the LegCo's operation, the Government will review the timetable for taking forward the relevant work.

On fire safety improvement works, the Government, in partnership with the Urban Renewal Authority (URA), implemented the \$2 billion Fire Safety Improvement Works Subsidy Scheme in 2018 to assist owners of old composite buildings to carry out improvement works for compliance with the enhanced fire safety requirements under the Fire Safety (Buildings) Ordinance. The URA received over 2 400 applications that met the basic requirements. Since the response was positive, we have proposed to allocate additional funding of \$3.5 billion, increasing the total subsidy funding from \$2 billion to \$5.5 billion so as to benefit more eligible owners of old composite buildings.

On combating the drug abuse problem, the number of reported drug abusers has continued to decrease. The total number of reported drug abusers decreased by 17 per cent in 2019 compared with that in the previous year, and by around 40 per cent compared with five years ago (i.e. 2014). This represents the achievements made as a result of the Government and various sectors of the community in fighting drugs together under the existing policy. However, the median history of drug abuse has increased from 4.6 years in 2017 to 5.5 years in 2019 (i.e. seeking help for the first time after taking drugs for 5.5 years). As such, the problem of hidden drug abuse requires our attention. In addition, the number of cannabis abusers has also increased. We will continue to take strong enforcement action and carry out publicity, and monitor the legalisation of cannabis in overseas jurisdictions.

On custody and rehabilitation, the Correctional Services Department (CSD) will continue to proactively develop "Smart Prison" through application of innovation and technology and modernising correctional facilities, so as to enhance the efficiency of penal management, the level of security and the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes.

On tasks taken up by the disciplined and auxiliary services in fighting the coronavirus, in addition to the work directly relevant to security policy areas mentioned above, in view of the development of the COVID-19 epidemic, under the co-ordination of the SB, the disciplined services and the two auxiliary forces have actively participated in the work of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government in fighting the epidemic.

The tasks concerned include providing different types of practical assistance to Hong Kong people outside Hong Kong; assisting in the preparation for the setting up of quarantine centres and temporary accommodation, as well as operation of these facilities; provision of emergency ambulance services or hospital admission/transfer services for persons requiring isolation or suspected/confirmed cases; assisting the Department of Health in issuing and enforcing quarantine orders; participation in the patrol and enforcement work relating to the requirements of prohibiting group gatherings; carrying out inspection of the quality of surgical masks sold; and participation in the expansion plan on mask production initiated by the CSD. Apart from serving colleagues, the participants also include volunteers who are retirees from disciplined forces. In particular, for the expansion plan on mask production initiated by the CSD, with the participation of around 2 000 serving and retired CSD officers as well as persons in custody, the mask production volume has increased in phases from a monthly average of 1.1 million pieces in January, and is expected to reach 5 million by mid-April. We estimate that the production volume may further increase to 7 million pieces per month in mid-May. The CSD will also explore the feasibility of producing other protective equipment.

I thank colleagues and volunteers of various forces for their hard work and readiness to contribute in participating in the above work.

Chairman, my colleagues and I are pleased to answer questions from Members.

[SLW's speaking notes on labour policy areas tabled at LegCo Finance Committee special meeting](#)

Following are the speaking notes of the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, on labour policy areas tabled at the special meeting of the Legislative Council (LegCo) Finance Committee today (April 9):

Chairman and Honourable Members,

Recurrent spending on labour and manpower development in 2020-21 is estimated to be \$2.46 billion, representing an increase of \$320 million (i.e. 15.1 per cent) over the revised estimate of \$2.14 billion last year. It accounts for 0.5 per cent of the total recurrent government expenditure. I will briefly highlight the key areas of work in respect of labour and manpower development in the coming year.

Supporting employees

Hong Kong's economy has seen negative growth since the second half of 2019 and the unemployment rate has been on the rise. Compounded with the threat posed by COVID-19, it is anticipated that the labour market will further deteriorate. The Government plans to raise the ceiling of the on-the-job training (OJT) allowance payable to employers under the Employment Programme for the Elderly and Middle-aged, the Youth Employment and Training Programme and the Work Orientation and Placement Scheme in the second half of this year, with a view to further encouraging employers to hire the elderly, young people and persons with disabilities. With the introduction of the enhancement measures, employers engaging a job seeker under these three employment programmes would be entitled to an allowance of up to \$60,000.

The Government will also launch a pilot scheme in the second half of this year to offer a retention allowance to eligible elderly persons, young people and persons with disabilities engaged under these employment programmes so as to encourage them to undergo and complete OJT, thereby stabilising employment. Subject to the length of the OJT period, the maximum amount of retention allowance that a full-time employee may receive is \$12,000.

Abolishing "offsetting" of severance payment and long service payment with employers' mandatory contributions under Mandatory Provident Fund System

Regarding the abolition of the arrangement of "offsetting" severance payment and long service payment with employers' mandatory contributions under the Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF) System, the Government will continue to work at full steam on the preparatory work, including mapping out the operational details of the supporting measures, such as assisting employers to set up designated saving accounts under their own name and embarking on the drafting of the enabling bill. The Government will strive to introduce the enabling bill into the LegCo by the end of this year, with a view to securing its passage by 2022 and implementing the abolition of the "offsetting" arrangement two years after the passage of the enabling bill and in tandem with the full implementation of the eMPF Platform of the MPF System.

Extending statutory maternity leave

The Government introduced the Employment (Amendment) Bill 2019 into the LegCo on January 8 this year. At present, the Panel on Manpower is handling the Bill. The Bill proposes that maternity leave (ML) under the Employment Ordinance be increased by four weeks and be taken by eligible employees continuously after the existing 10 weeks' ML. The current statutory rate of

maternity leave pay (MLP) (i.e. four-fifths of the employee's average daily wages) would be maintained for calculating the additional MLP in respect of the extension of ML, subject to a cap of \$36,822 per employee. The cap amount may be reviewed from time to time. While the cap is stipulated in the Bill, the employer is not prohibited from paying a higher amount to the employee under the contract of employment.

The additional four weeks' MLP will be funded by the Government by way of reimbursement to employers through an administrative scheme. The Labour Department (LD) will develop a new Disbursement Information System (DIS) for implementing the new Reimbursement of Maternity Leave Pay Scheme (RMLPS). The Government consulted the Panel on Manpower on the proposal for developing the DIS this January. Members had no objection in principle to the Government's submission of the proposal to the Finance Committee for funding approval. Subject to the passage of the Bill and approval of funding for the DIS within the current LegCo session, the Government aims to implement the RMLPS by the end of next year.

Increasing progressively the number of statutory holidays

The Chief Executive announced on January 14 this year 10 new initiatives on improving people's livelihoods, one of which is to increase progressively the number of statutory holidays so that it is eventually on par with the number of general holidays. The Government will work out and invite the Labour Advisory Board (LAB) to discuss the relevant proposal, and facilitate and support its work. The LD will provide relevant information for the LAB to discuss the proposal.

Setting up dedicated Foreign Domestic Helpers Division

Foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) are an important workforce in Hong Kong. The LD will set up a dedicated FDH Division to ensure effective co-ordination and implementation of measures to strengthen the protection of FDHs, and provide better support to FDHs and their employers. The responsibilities of the Division include enhancing publicity and education efforts, providing more support services to FDHs and employers, supporting the implementation of FDH policy measures, and exploring new FDH source countries.

Enhancing occupational safety and health

The Government attaches great importance to the occupational safety and health (OSH) of employees. The LD adjusts its strategies of inspection and enforcement, publicity and promotion, as well as education and training, according to the OSH risk levels of different industries, driving employers and employees to work together in taking sufficient precautionary measures to prevent accidents.

As the number of fatal industrial accidents in the construction industry and its accident rate per 1 000 workers have been the highest among all industries, the LD will continue to undertake a series of targeted measures to improve construction workers' OSH. These measures include conducting in-depth surprise inspections of construction sites involving high-risk

processes or with poor safety performance, and stepping up participation in site safety management committee meetings of public work projects so that the LD will be apprised of their latest risk situation and give advice and adjust the inspection strategy accordingly in a more focused manner. In addition, with a view to enhancing the protection of workers of the renovation and maintenance sector, the LD will establish an additional office through new resources allocated this year to monitor the OSH of renovation, maintenance, alteration and addition works.

The LD launched a Construction Safety Ambassador Pilot Scheme early this year, encouraging construction workers to report any unsafe working conditions to the LD. The LD collaborated with the property management sector to strengthen the current referral mechanism for renovation and maintenance works carried out in individual units of estates. The LD is also refining the statutory notification mechanism of construction works to cover those with shorter duration or engaging fewer workers but involving higher risks. Upon receipt of the relevant information, the LD will conduct targeted inspections in accordance with the nature and risk level.

Furthermore, the LD will continue to launch large-scale promotional programmes and produce Work Safety Alerts in the form of animation videos to enhance OSH awareness of stakeholders.

Pilot rehabilitation programme for employees injured at work

The Chief Executive announced in the 2019 Policy Address the Government's plan to introduce a three-year pilot rehabilitation programme for employees injured at work (Pilot Programme) targeting injured employees from the construction industry. The Government also proposed to commission the Occupational Safety and Health Council to administer the Pilot Programme through legislative amendments. The Pilot Programme will be mainly funded by the Government, while employers are to shoulder part of the rehabilitation treatment expenses to fulfil their existing statutory responsibility under the Employees' Compensation Ordinance.

After consultation with relevant stakeholders on the design and proposed mechanics of the Pilot Programme, the LD has embarked on drafting legislative amendments and drawing up details for the Pilot Programme. The Government aims to introduce a bill to amend the Occupational Safety and Health Council Ordinance into the LegCo in the 2020-21 legislative session. Subject to the progress of the legislative amendment exercise and the time required for concrete preparatory work, the Government envisages launching the Pilot Programme in 2022.

Training support for employees

The Employees Retraining Board (ERB) launched the Love Upgrading Special Scheme in October last year to provide comprehensive training for two to three months to employees affected by the economic downturn and special allowance to eligible trainees during the training period. In view of the positive response to the Special Scheme, the 2020-21 Budget proposed to allocate \$2.5 billion for the ERB's enhancement and extension of the Special

Scheme. The ERB has published a subsidiary legislation in the Gazette on March 27, 2020, and submitted it for tabling at the LegCo to increase the maximum amount of monthly allowance per trainee from \$4,000 to \$5,800, with a target commencement date on May 25. This initiative will benefit over 40 000 eligible trainees who take part in the regular courses and those of the Special Scheme annually.

Chairman, this concludes my opening remarks. Members are welcome to raise questions.

Update on latest MERS situation in Saudi Arabia

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health is today (April 9) closely monitoring 18 additional cases of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) by Saudi Arabia from February 1 to 29. The CHP again urged the public to pay special attention to safety during travel, taking due consideration of the health risks in the places they visit.

According to the WHO, the 18 additional cases involve 16 male and two female patients aged 28 to 81, with 17 of them having underlying illnesses. Among them, four had exposure to camels and consumed camel milk, and five have passed away.

According to the latest information, 2 538 cases have been reported to the WHO (with 871 deaths), including 2 319 in 10 Middle East countries comprising 2 139 in Saudi Arabia, 91 in the United Arab Emirates, 28 in Jordan, 24 in Oman, 23 in Qatar, six in Iran, four in Kuwait, two in Lebanon, and one each in Yemen and Bahrain.

"We will maintain close communication with the WHO and relevant health authorities," a spokesman for the CHP said.

"As countries in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, continue to report MERS cases from time to time, travellers should refrain from going to farms, barns or markets with camels and avoid contact with sick persons and animals, especially camels, birds or poultry. Most of the cases reported in the Middle East had a history of exposure to camels, consumption of camel milk or contact with other MERS patients," the spokesman said.

"Scientific evidence shows that camels are reservoirs for MERS Coronavirus (MERS-CoV). Camels infected with MERS-CoV may not show any signs of infection. Infected animals may shed MERS-CoV through nasal and eye discharge and faeces, and potentially in their milk and urine. The virus may also be found in the raw organs and meat of infected animals. Therefore, the

best protection is to practise good hygiene and avoid direct contact with all of these," the spokesman added.

From time to time, suspected MERS cases reported to the CHP for investigation involve patients with a history of contact with camels in the Middle East. The CHP strongly advises travel agents organising tours to the Middle East to abstain from arranging camel rides and activities involving direct contact with camels, which are known risk factors for acquiring MERS-CoV.

Travellers to affected areas should maintain vigilance, adopt appropriate health precautions and take heed of personal, food and environmental hygiene. The public may visit the MERS page of the [CHP](#) and its [Travel Health Service](#) to learn more about MERS statistics in [affected areas](#). The public should also refer to the CHP's [Facebook page](#) and [YouTube channel](#) and the WHO's [latest news](#) for more information and health advice. Tour leaders and tour guides operating overseas tours are advised to refer to the CHP's [health advice on MERS](#).

Postal services to certain destinations suspended

Hongkong Post today (April 9) announced the need to suspend Speedpost services to the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) starting from April 14 owing to the substantial reduction in flight frequencies by airlines, which has resulted in a nearly complete inability to provide any air traffic capacity to cope with the volume of Speedpost items conveyed to the UK and the USA. Hongkong Post had previously made an announcement about the service suspension of air mail to the UK and the USA on March 27. Members of the public may consider using surface mail for posting items to the UK and the USA as the frequencies of the shipping schedules to the two destinations have been increased to once per week. It is estimated that the journey time for posting through surface mail to the UK and the USA would take about 25 days and 31 days respectively.

Destinations		Service types available	Estimated journey time for surface mail
Europe	UK	Surface mail	25 days
North America	USA	Surface mail	31 days

In addition, destinations in Europe listed below are also suffering from

insufficient air traffic capacity as a result of continued flight reductions. Hongkong Post will try to maintain the Speedpost service to these destinations as far as possible to facilitate the posting of urgent mail by the public. Notwithstanding this, Speedpost items handed to airlines for conveyance to these destinations are still subject to delays of more than one week despite the completion of handling procedures by Hongkong Post subsequent to posting.

Destinations		Service types available
Europe	France	Speedpost
	Italy	Speedpost and surface mail
	Netherlands	Speedpost and surface mail

Moreover, mail items to be sent to the following destinations are required to transit via the above destinations, therefore services for them will also be affected to varying degrees:

Destinations		Service types available
Africa	Réunion	Speedpost and surface mail
	Algeria	Speedpost
	Côte d'Ivoire	Speedpost
	Senegal	—
Central and South America	El Salvador	Speedpost and air parcel
	Guatemala	Speedpost and air parcel
	Puerto Rico	Surface mail
	Virgin Islands (USA)	Surface mail
Europe	San Marino	Speedpost
	Vatican	—

Members of the public may visit the Hongkong Post website and refer to the links:
www.hongkongpost.hk/en/about_us/whats_new/notices/index_id_909.html,
www.hongkongpost.hk/en/about_us/whats_new/notices/index_id_910.html
and www.hongkongpost.hk/en/preparation/posting/latest_dates/index.html for all the destinations affected and the latest dates of posting for forthcoming surface despatches.

Effective Exchange Rate Index

The effective exchange rate index for the Hong Kong dollar on Thursday, April 9, 2020 is 108.6 (down 0.1 against yesterday's index).