

LCQ16: Assistance to inbound visitors

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Following is a written reply by the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mrs Rita Lau, to a question by the Hon Paul Tse in the Legislative Council today (April 14):

Question:

It was reported that a tour group of 24 travellers arriving at Hong Kong from the Philippines in the evening of March 9 this year was suspected to have been deceived, and had to wait miserably at the Hong Kong International Airport for more than six hours, but were still not received by staff of the travel agency concerned. Such travellers had later learned that the travel agency and the receiving organisation in Hong Kong had not made any accommodation arrangements for them. They had called the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong (TIC), the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) and the Consulate General of the Philippines in Hong Kong respectively to seek immediate assistance, but they did not receive any assistance. Finally, the Member of the Legislative Council returned by the tourism functional constituency had arranged for their accommodation for that night and provided them with other assistance. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) of the respective numbers of cases received by the various government departments concerned in each of the past three years of travellers visiting Hong Kong who requested for emergency assistance; and what established mechanisms or measures are in place for handling such cases;

(b) whether it has assessed if the cause of HKTB's and TIC's failure to immediately handle the aforesaid case of request for assistance and to provide emergency assistance to such travellers was related to the fact that the incident occurred after office hours; if an assessment has been conducted, of

the outcome; if not, whether it will conduct an assessment expeditiously; and

(c) given that some members of the trade have pointed out that at present, the Tourism Commission, HKTB and TIC do not provide emergency services after office hours to travellers stranded in Hong Kong as a result of being involved in cases similar to the above deception case or other unexpected incidents, of the reasons for not providing such services; whether it has assessed the adverse impact of the lack of such services on the tourism industry in Hong Kong; if an assessment has been conducted, of the outcome; if not, whether it will conduct an assessment expeditiously; and what improvement measures are in place?

Reply:

President,

In general, travellers visiting Hong Kong who encounter difficulties and wish to seek assistance may contact the Hong Kong Police Force (the Police) or the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB). Depending on the nature of the cases, the Police or the HKTB will provide assistance or refer the cases to other departments or organisations. Inbound travellers may also seek help from consulates of their countries of origin in Hong Kong when running into difficulties.

In the evening of March 9, 2010, a tour group from the Philippines arrived at Hong Kong and found there was neither a tour guide receiving them at the airport nor had hotel reservation been arranged by the Philippine side. According to the investigation of the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong (TIC), the case did not involve any Hong Kong travel agent, and is suspected to be a case of fraud in the Philippines.

Although the concerned government departments and organisations could not provide immediate assistance right

after the group had arrived without reception arrangements in Hong Kong, once they learned of the incident, they all worked together to help the affected tourists to enable them to continue their original itineraries on concessionary rates at their own expenses. The visitors concerned had thus experienced Hong Kong's hospitality culture. Officials of the Consulate General of the Philippines in Hong Kong also said that our response and arrangements were timely and thoughtful, and the Philippine media widely reported the arrangements made by us.

My reply to the various parts of the question is as follows:

(a) In each of the past three years, the total number of cases received by the Tourism Commission (TC), the HKTB, the TIC and the Consumer Council on requests for assistance from travellers visiting Hong Kong are set out below.

Financial Year	Number of cases requiring assistance
2007-08	2,910 cases
2008-09	2,137 cases
2009-10	1,914 cases

The requests for assistance cover a rather wide scope, including loss of identity documents, injuries from accidents, loss of property, loss of contact with their tour groups, shopping-related matters etc. Frontline departments and organisations such as the Police and the Immigration Department also receive requests for assistance or enquiries from travellers visiting Hong Kong but have not further categorised the requests according to whether they originated from travellers or whether they were urgent. On receiving requests for assistance, the relevant departments and organisations will make every effort to provide timely assistance.

(b) and (c) There is a notification mechanism among government

departments and related organisations in dealing with matters concerning inbound travellers. Notifications can be made 24 hours a day whenever necessary. In fact, relevant government departments and organisations had in the past experience in and examples of handling requests for assistance from travellers after office hours. There are no statistics on whether there were cases which immediate assistance had not been offered to travellers because the requests were made outside office hours.

In the light of the Philippine tour group incident, the TC has again co-ordinated with the government departments and organisations that have relatively more contacts with inbound visitors. We have reviewed the above notification mechanism. We have looked at how communication among parties concerned after office hours could be made more timely and effective. Improvement measures were worked out to ensure that the mechanism could operate more smoothly in future. In case of emergencies involving travellers that frontline agencies cannot resolve themselves, the agencies will notify the TC and the TIC promptly, no matter whether the emergencies occur within or outside office hours. The TC, the TIC as well as the departments and organisations concerned can then follow up as soon as practicable.

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