

LCQ19: Handling emergencies concerning outbound travel

Following is a written reply by the Acting Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Gregory So, to a question by the Hon Paul Tse in the Legislative Council today (April 13):

Question:

It has been reported that the 9 magnitude earthquake and radiation leak incident that happened in Japan on the March 11 this year struck the tourism industry severely and also gave rise to many complaints. Some outbound tour escorts and guides said that they did not know how to handle travellers' panic, and the crisis handling guidelines under the prevailing Code of Conduct for Outbound Tour Escorts and the relevant training provided under the accreditation system are confined to the arrangement of itineraries and tour group members' safety only, with no specific guidelines for handling sudden incidents such as earthquake or being held hostage during the tour. Some members of the tourism industry have recently suggested to the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong (TIC) that it organises relevant talks but no reply is received so far, and they consider that "the support to the industry provided by TIC is virtually nil". In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) whether the Tourism Commission and the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau, which are responsible for monitoring the operations of TIC, have studied any policy and measure to help the tourism industry handle problems caused by natural disasters; if they have, of the details; if not, whether they will do so as soon as possible;

(b) whether it knows the number of complaints regarding Japan-bound tours received by TIC from members of the tourism industry and travellers since the 9 magnitude earthquake in Japan; among such complaints, of the number of cases that have already been settled with the assistance from TIC; and the number of unsettled cases or appeals; and

(c) whether it knows the numbers of complaints alleging the mishandling of complaints by TIC received by TIC and the Consumer Council respectively since the 9 magnitude earthquake in Japan; in view of such complaints, whether the Government has proposed any improvement plan to TIC; if it has, of the plan?

Reply:

President,

Under the current system, the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong (TIC) is responsible for co-ordinating travel agents in handling emergencies concerning outbound travel. In case of emergencies outside Hong Kong (such as natural disasters affecting tour itineraries), TIC will attend Government's inter-departmental meetings upon invitation to assist in the handling of tourism-related matters. TIC will also invite all travel agents that operate outbound tours to the affected areas to discuss handling of the situation. The Tourism Commission (TC) will assist TIC in liaising with the relevant Government departments.

According to TIC's requirements, all outbound tour escorts must complete the Certificate Course for Outbound Tour Escorts, which includes topics such as "basic principles and skills of crisis management" and "handling of emergencies". Through case study and group discussion, the course covers the handling of accidents, natural disasters, riots and terrorist activities. After the Manila hostage incident in August 2010, TIC liaised with the Police immediately to host two seminars for the management of travel agents and instructors of tour escort courses on proper response when tour groups encounter riots and terrorist activities. Recently, TIC received a request from the trade to organise seminars for tour escorts and travel agents' management on how to manage outbound tours in the light of natural disasters. TIC replied that seminars and talks on the theme of "contingency arrangements for tour groups affected by different natural disasters" would be organised this year. TIC also regularly reviews the Certificate Course for Outbound Tour Escorts to ensure that the contents are up-to-date and could meet the developments and needs of the tourism industry.

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

(a) When the safety of Hong Kong residents overseas is affected by large-scale natural disasters or incidents, the Government will activate contingency arrangements, and if necessary, convene inter-departmental meetings to co-ordinate the response. The TC under the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau participates actively in the relevant meetings. The TC both relays the views of the tourism trade and provides information on the latest developments to the trade. When travel agents need to cancel tours or curtail itineraries due to emergencies at the

destination, the TC will remind the trade to handle the refund and other follow-up arrangements properly.

The TC, together with the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB), monitors closely the development of individual emergency incident such as natural disaster, and assesses the impact of the incident on the tourism industry. Taking the severe earthquake in Japan on March 11, 2011 as an example, having regard that the incident has affected Japanese tourists' desire to travel, HKTB has suspended its promotion work in Japan, and will strengthen promotion to attract Japanese tourists to Hong Kong when the market environment improves. On the other hand, HKTB will further attract visitors from Mainland China, other Asian markets and long-haul markets to mitigate the impact of Japan's severe earthquake on the Hong Kong tourism industry. To minimise the impact of Japanese tour cancellations on travel agents and trade practitioners, we also encourage travel agents to promote and arrange the affected visitors to join tours to other destinations, such that travellers would not have to cancel their travel plans due to the earthquake in Japan, and tour escorts affected by tour cancellations could have job opportunities to reduce their losses. We will continue our work in these areas.

(b) and (c) From March 11 to April 8, TIC has received a total of 17 complaint cases from tourists in relation to Japan-bound tours. Two cases have been resolved with TIC's assistance and TIC is processing the remaining 15 cases. TIC has not received complaint case from the trade concerning Japanese tours. As at April 8, TIC and the Consumer Council have not received complaint case alleging TIC's mishandling of complaints concerning Japanese tours.

Ends/Wednesday, April 13, 2011

Issued at HKT 13:05