

For information
on 10 June 2004

Legislative Council Panel on Security

Measures to combat robbery of hikers and provision of emergency assistance to hikers

Purpose

This note is provided in response to Members' request for information on measures to combat robbery of hikers and provision of emergency assistance to hikers.

Background

2. The Government is committed to protecting life and property as well as preventing and detecting crime in all parts of Hong Kong, including the country parks. Hikers may call the Police or the Fire Services Department (FSD) at the 999 Emergency Hotline for assistance in the case of an emergency. The Auxiliary Medical Service (AMS), Civil Aid Service (CAS) and Government Flying Service (GFS) will also be deployed to assist in rescue operations as necessary.

Measures to combat robbery of hikers

3. The Police have deployed resources strategically for combating robbery of hikers. Police officers are dispatched to patrol the country parks in the light of operational requirements. Different forms of patrol are conducted to suit the actual circumstances. For example, there are patrols by police cars, by police motorcycles, and with the assistance of police dogs. Large-scale "sweeping operations" in country parks are also arranged from time to time to detect illegal immigrants and suspected offenders. These patrols and operations facilitate Police detection of illegal activities and response to calls for assistance. The enhanced visible police presence also has a deterrent effect on robbery of hikers. Moreover, the Police collect intelligence with a view to preventing such crimes.

4. On receipt of a report of robbery of hikers, the Police will immediately deploy officers to the scene to render assistance to the victims and start the investigation. Evidence will be collected at the scene and the victims and witnesses, if any, will be interviewed. Moreover, the Police will enhance patrol in the area with a view to arresting the suspects and preventing recurrence of the crime.

5. Other Government departments also contribute to the prevention and detection of robbery of hikers. For example, park wardens of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) patrol country parks and maintain close liaison with the Police to combat such crimes. AFCD has stepped up such patrols in view of public concern over recent robbery cases. CAS also deploys patrol teams to country parks during Sundays and public holidays. If the patrol teams find suspected persons or suspected dwellings of illegal immigrants, they will inform the Police promptly for follow-up.

Provision of emergency assistance to hikers

6. FSD provides other emergency assistance to hikers in distress, for instance, when they lose their way, run into accident or need medical attention. CAS will also be deployed, when necessary, to assist the regular forces to search and rescue people in distress in the country parks. On Sundays and public holidays, AMS provides first aid and ambulance services at first-aid posts at designated points in country parks assigned by AFCD. In situations whereby the hikers are in critical medical condition or dangerous locations, helicopters of GFS may be tasked out immediately upon receipt of the call for assistance.

Communication with emergency centres and personnel

7. To facilitate emergency operations, communication between the person in distress and the emergency rescue centres, and identification of the location of the person in distress are of vital importance.

8. There are at present 102 Emergency Helplines and 100 payphones installed at various locations in or near the country parks to facilitate callers in contacting the 999 control centre. There is an additional 45 Emergency Helplines installed at other remote locations, such as Lugard Road Walkway at the Peak, juncture of Wanchai Gap Road and Bowen Road, and main entrance of Lion Rock Park at Beacon Hill. Many of the Helplines and payphones were

installed after taking into account the views of hiking groups and concerned groups to improve safety and facilitate hikers.

9. As regards mobile phones, there are at present a total of six mobile base stations in country parks and two new ones are being planned. Although the Government does not have a policy for ubiquitous mobile phone services coverage, these have been installed or planned since 1998 as a result of Government's efforts in encouraging improvement of mobile phone coverage in country parks. The key efforts by AFCD and the Office of the Telecommunications Authority (OFTA) include –

- (a) in order to reduce mobile phone operators' recurrent costs in maintaining mobile base stations in country parks, the tenancy fee for such base station sites is charged at a nominal level of \$1 per annum; and
- (b) OFTA has taken the lead in co-ordinating the sharing of sites by different mobile phone operators to reduce costs and minimize environmental impact. At present, the mobile base station sites are invariably shared by participating mobile phone operators unless there is physical constraint.

10. From the perspective of ensuring public safety, we appreciate that there may be room for further improvement of mobile phone coverage in country parks. However, given the extensiveness and varying geographical conditions of country parks, there are inevitably areas that are not covered by mobile phone networks. The key is to find the most cost-effective and appropriate way to address this problem. To this end, the Government will continue to encourage mobile phone operators to improve their services coverage in country parks. At the same time, we will continue to explore other alternatives.

11. To assist hikers in identifying location, AFCD has set up signposts and boards displaying location maps in country parks and along hiking trails. Distance posts at 500-metre intervals have also been erected along the four long-distance hiking trails and all the country trails in country parks. In the case of an emergency, hikers may inform the rescue centre of the serial number or grid reference of the nearest distance post to assist rescuers to reach the scene.

The CAS, FSD and Police all have information on these distance posts and can readily identify their locations from the control centres. Information on the distance posts has also been uploaded onto AFCD's website for access by the public.

12. To supplement the signposts and boards set up by AFCD, the Police have recently initiated a pilot scheme in Kowloon West Region to put up information signboards at country parks to assist the Police and other emergency departments to identify the caller's location. Under the pilot scheme, 30 information signs have been put up at shelters, barbeque and picnic sites at the Kam Shan Country Park, and along Eagle's Nest Nature Trail, Lung Yan Road, Cheung Yuen Road and Cheung Hang Road. The scheme will be reviewed in due course and may be extended to other districts as appropriate.

Publicity and public education

13. We attach great importance to raising public awareness of hiking safety and the fight against crime in country parks. The Police, for instance, have advised the public to go hiking in groups, keep their families informed of the proposed route and the approximate time of their return, bring less cash and credit cards when hiking, keep calm when being robbed and try to remember the characteristics of the robbers. AFCD has produced an information pamphlet, an "Announcement in the Public Interest" (API) and video on hiking safety. The pamphlet and video have also been uploaded onto the website of the Department. More recently, a joint press briefing by the Police and AFCD was held on 13 May 2004 to introduce the Police trial scheme on the information signboards, the use of the distance posts and other hiking safety tips. On 22 May 2004, AFCD organized a seminar on hiking safety for secondary and primary school teachers. Given the importance of callers (for emergency assistance) being able to identify their own locations, AFCD will produce a new API focusing on hiking safety and the use of distance posts in identifying locations in country parks. Other publicity efforts and public education programmes to promote hiking safety will be stepped up, as necessary.