

For Information

LegCo Panel on Security

Assistance to Hong Kong people affected by Tsunamis

Introduction

An earthquake measuring 9.0 on the Richter Scale occurred off Sumatra, Indonesia, on 26 December 2004. The earthquake triggered massive tsunamis that smashed coastlines along several south and Southeast Asian countries including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, causing extremely serious losses of lives and properties in the process.

Actions Taken by the HKSAR Government

2. The HKSAR Government is deeply aggrieved by the incident. The Chief Executive has indicated that the HKSAR Government would do everything possible to offer assistance to Hong Kong residents so that they could return home as soon as possible. To this end, he has tasked the Chief Secretary for Administration to lead a task force comprising all relevant bureaux and departments including Security Bureau (SB); Economic Development and Labour Bureau (EDLB); Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB); Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB); Home Affairs Bureau (HAB); Home Affairs Department (HAD); Hong Kong Police Force (the Police); Immigration Department (ImmD); Information Services Department (ISD); and the Director of Administration's Office (DoA).

3. Key events that have taken place are set out in the following paragraphs.

Immediate Responses

4. The HKSAR Government learnt about the tsunamis at noon on 26 December. We immediately established contact with the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong, and were advised that all our package tours in and around Phuket were reported safe. We also knew that a number of Hong Kong residents were travelling individually, but we had not been able to ascertain the figures. Locating these Hong Kong

residents who were travelling as individuals has therefore been a focus of our work.

5. On the same day, through the Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs we contacted the Chinese diplomatic and consular missions at the affected countries. Staff of our embassies and consulates at these countries were requested to assess the extent of damage as well as to render necessary assistance to wounded or stranded Hong Kong residents. In the same afternoon, despite the suspension of flights, the Chinese Consul-General at Songkhla, Thailand sent staff to Phuket, which is some six hours away by road, to locate and assist stranded Hong Kong residents. Staff from the Embassy at Bangkok also travelled to Phuket in the evening.

6. In the afternoon of 26 December, ImmD made preparations for sending staff to Phuket but, owing to suspension of flights following the tsunamis, ImmD staff departed for Phuket on the first available direct flight the next day. Medical staff and a rescue team of the Fire Services Department were also put on standby.

7. The Government announced to the public a 24-hour telephone hotline in the afternoon of 26 December, and ImmD reinforced staff deployment to operate the hotline.

8. On 27 December, two immigration officers arrived at Phuket on the first flight and immediately started their assessment of the local situation. Two additional officers were sent to Phuket later in the day in the light of the extensive damage observed. We also sent two other officers to Colombo, Sri Lanka on the same day to assess the situation there.

9. On the same day, EDLB and the Civil Aviation Department liaised with airlines which operate flights between Hong Kong and the affected areas. The airlines undertook to accord the greatest flexibility to facilitate the return of Hong Kong residents, and that they would operate extra flights should the need arise. We also closely monitored flight bookings to ensure that there were sufficient seats on these routes. We also made contingency arrangements with airlines so that where necessary charter flights could be deployed immediately to cater for the speedy return of Hong Kong residents.

10. On 28 December, the third day after the tsunamis, the Chief Executive appointed the Chief Secretary for Administration to coordinate

the government's efforts in dealing with the tsunami disaster. In the following two weeks, the Chief Secretary's Task Force met almost every day to ensure that all government actions were on track and well coordinated.

11. On the same day, four more officers were despatched to Thailand and two more to Colombo. There were by then eight immigration officers in Bangkok and Phuket, and four officers in Colombo. In addition, the Chief Secretary for Administration met consular representatives of the four countries struck by the tsunamis (i.e. Thailand, India, the Maldives and Indonesia), obtained from them information on the local situation, and expressed our willingness to offer appropriate aid.

12. On 29 December, SB together with the Police, ImmD, the Civil Aid Service (CAS) and the Auxiliary Medical Service (AMS), made preparations for a major reinforcement of personnel to the tsunami stricken areas in Thailand. Following endorsement by the Chief Secretary's Task Force for the deployment of the Hong Kong Support Team, 19 immigration officers departed for Phuket that day to prepare for the arrival of the major reinforcement on the following day. On the same day, the first team of medical staff and clinical psychologists also arrived in Phuket.

13. On 30 December, more than 120 officers from SB, the Police, ImmD, ISD, CAS and AMS as well as the second team of medical staff and clinical psychologist arrived in Phuket. The Command Centre for the Hong Kong Support Team started its round-the-clock operation on the same day.

14. In other words, the HKSAR Government had since 27 December, the day after the tsunamis, continued to reinforce its contingent of relief personnel in Phuket. Within three days, more than 160 officers had been deployed to Bangkok, Phuket and nearby sites which are popular amongst Hong Kong tourists to provide assistance to Hong Kong residents who might be affected by the disaster.

15. On 1 January 2005, HAD organized a fund-raising concert at the Hong Kong Stadium to fund relief efforts of the tsunami-hit countries in South Asia. Part of the donations gathered would be used to meet the needs of Hong Kong residents who had lost their loved ones in the disaster.

Work of the Hong Kong Support Team

16. Apart from setting up a Command Centre to oversee the operation, the Hong Kong Support Team also set up three 24-hour hotlines so that Hong Kong residents could approach the Team for necessary assistance. In addition, three help desks were set up at the Bangkok Airport, Phuket Airport and the Thai Government Co-ordination Centre to render practicable assistance to Hong Kong residents (e.g. issuing temporary travel documents for Hong Kong persons who had lost their documents, arranging flights and even procuring emergency supplies for Hong Kong residents).

17. Members of the Support Team were stationed at major hospitals in Phuket to assist injured Hong Kong residents and their families. Team members also visited major hospitals in Khao Lak, Krabi¹ and Bangkok to look for any Hong Kong residents who might be hospitalised there.

18. At the same time, Team members were also sent out to tourist spots in Phuket to trace the whereabouts of Hong Kong residents who might have been there when the tsunamis struck. The locations visited included the Magic Lagoon Resort in Khao Lak where many Hong Kong residents were reported to have stayed. In parallel, the Hong Kong Support Team helped collect DNA samples from Hong Kong residents in Thailand whose family members might have been affected by the tsunamis.

19. As the situation of the tsunami-hit areas in Thailand became more stable, we have continued to adjust the operations of the Support Team, including its strength, in the light of the changing demand for its services. As at 14 January, the Support Team in Thailand were manned by 24 members and continued to provide essential services to Hong Kong residents who might require assistance on the ground.

Other Supporting Services

Dedicated Website

20. A dedicated website has been provided to facilitate members of the public to get more information about the tsunamis incident. It carries hotlines of Chinese embassies and consulates in the tsunamis-hit

¹ People injured on the Phi Phi Island are believed to have been sent to Krabi for treatment.

areas as well as those of the concerned HKSAR Government departments. With the consent of the families concerned, information on those Hong Kong residents reported to have lost contact with their Hong Kong families has also been uploaded on the website.

Financial and Material Relief Help

21. As at 14 January, the Disaster Relief Fund Advisory Committee had approved \$21 million for three major agencies (i.e. Oxfam Hong Kong, World Vision and Red Cross) to provide relief in Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka. On 30 December 2004, it also approved a fast-track mechanism for the HKSAR Government to make direct grants to governments of the affected countries.

22. Upon the respective requests of the Thai authorities and the Indonesian authorities, the DoA's Office coordinated with EDLB and Government Logistics Department for air delivery of 2 tonnes of relief supplies donated by the HKSAR Government to Phuket by air on 1 January and 76 tones of relief supplies to Jakarta on 7 January. Hong Kong airlines have rendered valuable assistance in providing free delivery of these supplies.

Help Rendered to Victim Families and Those Affected by the Disaster

23. HAB and HAD have been offering help to those who were in Hong Kong waiting anxiously for news of their family members or friends who had travelled to the tsunami-hit areas. The District Officers also contacted informants who had called ImmD's hotline because they thought that their family members or friends were missing in the affected countries. As at 18 January, over 200 families have been contacted. A hotline has also been established by HAD to receive enquiries and requests for assistance. HAD would take follow up actions and provide referral services including financial assistance in accordance with the needs of affected families. In addition, HAD set up a joint Help Desk with the Social Welfare Department at the Hong Kong International Airport from 31 December 2004 to 16 January 2005. The Help Desk provided enquiry and referral services for Hong Kong residents returning from the Tsunami disaster areas.

24. The Social Welfare Department has also set up a special hotline (9184 3775) manned by clinical psychologists to provide counseling services to those affected. Up to 12 January (when the hotline ceased operation), the hotline had received 118 calls. As at 12 January, four

Critical Incident Debriefing sessions were held for Hong Kong residents and tour guides who returned from tours in Thailand, for the general public affected by the tsunami through watching the news and for public officers who returned from special duties in South Asia. For those treated in public hospitals, medical social workers there provided them with emotional support and counseling.

25. On 31 December 2004, EMB issued a circular to schools requesting them to report on the number of staff or students who might be absent from school as a result of the tsunami, in order to assess the needs of schools for and render them with the necessary counseling support. Operational guidelines and counseling hotlines were provided to schools on how to help students distressed by the sudden death of teacher/peer/family member in the tsunami disaster. Reference materials for supporting students in distress had been uploaded on the EMB website for schools' reference. EMB had also rendered counseling support to schools with missing students/staff.

Latest Situation

26. As at noon 17 January, there remained 34 cases in which the callers were able to provide the personal particulars of the residents concerned as well as some information about their last known locations. Among them, 31 were reported to be in Thailand and 3 in Indonesia. As at noon 17 January, a total of 12 deaths involving Hong Kong residents had been reported to us.

Security Bureau
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