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**Legislative Council**

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**Panel on Constitutional Affairs**

**Background Brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the  
meeting on 17 November 2008**

**Establishment of Regional Support Service Centres for Ethnic Minorities**

**Purpose**

This paper gives a brief account of past discussions of the former Bills Committee on Race Discrimination Bill (the Bills Committee) on the need for support services for ethnic minorities.

**Concerns of the Bills Committee**

2. Some members of the Bills Committee expressed grave concern over the language barrier encountered by ethnic minorities in gaining access to essential public services, in particular medical services. They stressed that discrimination in the use of language was a real issue which could and did exclude certain racial groups from essential public services and benefits, including vocational training opportunities and medical treatment. These members considered that a policy decision must be made to ensure that vocational training institutions would have adequate resources to conduct designated programmes and courses to cater for the needs of ethnic minorities including those who knew little English.

3. Concerned organizations and ethnic minority groups submitting views to the Bills Committee also stressed to members that ethnic minorities faced great difficulties in gaining access to vocational training resources and medical services. They complained in particular that ethnic minorities were unable to obtain appropriate and necessary medical treatment because of the lack of interpretation services at hospitals.

**The Administration's response**

4. The Administration took the view that the most effective way of addressing the needs of those members of ethnic minorities who had difficulties using English or Chinese would be through enhanced support in vocational education/training and through provision of interpretation for access to public services. The Administration further informed the Bills Committee that the Vocational Training Council (VTC) had set up an Ethnic Minority Student Support Centre in its Hong Kong Institute of

Vocational Education (Haking Wong) Campus in Sham Shui Po District for the provision of dedicated support for non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students. VTC would continue to explore the possibility of spreading out the venues where courses were offered for ethnic minorities, especially in districts where there were a relatively high concentration of ethnic minorities. The Employees Retraining Board also planned to work with its training bodies to offer training and employment support services targetting ethnic minorities in these districts. A resource corner catering to the special needs of ethnic minorities would also be set up in the one-stop Training cum Employment Resources Centre to be opened in Sham Shui Po.

5. With regard to assistance to ethnic minorities in overcoming the language barrier in using public services, the Administration explained that a two-pronged approach was adopted. Substantial resources were devoted through the education system to promote the teaching and learning of NCS students and to organize language training classes through the Race Relations Unit of the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau for members of the ethnic minorities to learn the local language. On the other hand, the Administration would arrange interpretation services at various front-line units, including hospitals, job centres and welfare service units as necessary. In the coming year, four regional support service centres would be established for ethnic minorities, especially to provide telephone interpretation services for ethnic minorities (through the employment of their own interpreters) to facilitate their access to public services. The Hospital Authority (HA) would also take various measures to enhance its interpretation support for ethnic minorities in gaining access to medical services. According to the Administration, HA would arrange training on interpretation of medical terms and arrange in-house interpretation service for frontline staff through service contract with an outside body. The latter was being implemented through a pilot project to be rolled out in New Territories West Cluster, Kowloon Central Cluster, Kowloon East Cluster and Kowloon West Cluster in mid-2008. This pilot project involved using part-time interpreters through an outside body to provide on-site interpretation for four common ethnic minority languages viz Urdu, Nepali, Hindi and Punjabi.

6. In his speech during the resumption of the Second Reading debate on the Bill on 9 July 2008, the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs informed Members that the Government had allocated \$16 million in 2008-2009 for the setting up of four support centres in different districts to provide interpretation services for ethnic minorities.

### **Relevant papers**

7. A list of relevant papers which are available on the LegCo website is in the **Appendix**.

**Establishment of Regional Support Service Centres for Ethnic Minorities**

**Relevant documents**

<u>Committee</u>	<u>Meeting Date</u>	<u>Paper</u>
Bills Committee on Race Discrimination Bill	12 March 2008	Letter dated 27 February 2008 from the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs to Chairman of the Bills Committee on support measures for ethnic minorities and new arrivals and proposed amendments to the Bill [LC Paper No. CB(2)1221/07-08(01)]
	16 April 2008	Administration's paper on "Vocational training and interpretation services at hospitals for ethnic minorities" [LC Paper No. CB(2)1385/07-08(01)]  Administration's paper on "Supplementary information in response to questions raised at the meeting held on 26 March 2008" [LC Paper No. CB(2)1600/07-08(01)]
	14 June 2008	Administration's paper on "Administration's Response to the outstanding general issues raised by members of the Bills Committee" [LC Paper No. CB(2)2297/07-08(01)]  Administration's paper on "Administration's response to views received from deputations on vocational training and on interpretation services at hospitals " [LC Paper No. CB(2)2297/07-08(02)]
	--	Letter dated 7 July 2008 from the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs on support measures for ethnic minorities and new arrivals [LC Paper No. CB(2)2552/07-08(01)]