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Panel on Economic Development
Meeting on 26 April 2010

**Background brief on policy regarding package tours bound for places
where the Outbound Travel Alert is in force**

Purpose

This paper provides background information on the Outbound Travel Alert (OTA) System and the policy of Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong (TIC) on package tours bound for places where OTA is in force. It also summarizes concerns raised by Members on related issues.

Outbound Travel Alert System

2. According to the information provided by the Administration to the Panel on Security (LC Paper No CB(2)2054/08-09(10)), the Security Bureau (SB) all along issues travel advice to the public on a need basis based on assessment of the threat in the place of incident. In the assessment, SB would obtain up-to-date information on the situation through various means, and make reference to the travel risk information and travel alerts promulgated in other countries.

3. In late November 2008, there was an incident that hundreds of Hong Kong residents were stranded in Thailand as Bangkok International Airport was occupied and ceased operation in the evening of 25 November 2008. The public was concerned that the travel advice issued by SB was not clearly understood by the general public. The Administration subsequently briefed the Panel on Security on 2 December 2008 on the assistance provided to the Hong Kong residents stranded in Thailand, and undertook to review the emergency response mechanism, with a view to identifying possible improvement measures that might help enhance the system to prevent the recurrence of similar incidents in future.

4. On 6 July 2009, the Panel on Security discussed the review of the travel alert and other assistance to Hong Kong travellers. Panel members enquired

whether the Administration would assess the degree of risk associated with various travel destinations and issue a colour alert based on the possible danger to public health. In October 2009, the OTA System was instituted to assist the public to better understand the risk or threat to personal safety in travelling to 60 countries that were the more popular travel destinations for Hong Kong residents.

5. The OTA System is based on a simple colour code with standard key messages which will be promulgated through press releases and SB's webpage:

	Amber	Red	Black
Scenario	Signs of threat	Significant threat	Severe threat
Key message	Monitor situation; exercise caution	Adjust travel plans; avoid non-essential travel	Avoid all travel

In assessing the risk, SB takes into consideration the level of threat to personal safety, duration of the threat, whether the threat is targeted at tourists, and whether the place is visited by many Hong Kong residents, including tour groups, individual tourists and visitors for business or visiting relatives. According to SB, it is not able to make simple categorization about the circumstances under which it will issue a particular alert as the risk situations in each incident can differ. In general, where there are signs of threat in a certain place which may affect the personal safety of Hong Kong residents, SB will, as a start, consider issuing Amber alert. In fact, most of the travel advice previously issued by SB could be classified as Amber alert under the new system.

6. While Hong Kong residents are encouraged to make reference to the OTA, if any, before travelling abroad or firming up their travel plans, it is a personal decision whether he/she chooses to continue the journey and travel abroad. It is also up to the relevant commercial entities to negotiate with their customers or individual travellers on related commercial or contractual arrangements. This is in line with the international practice, i.e. government will issue travel alerts based on threat assessment and consideration of personal safety, and will not cause undue interference to commercial activities.

Coordination with the travel trade

7. During the review of the travel alert following the incident in late 2008, SB together with the relevant bureaux had exchanged views with the travel trade as well as airlines and insurance sectors. In general, they agreed that the new system will provide clearer messages and facilitate the public's better understanding of the risk to personal safety associated with the visit to a particular place.

8. The travel trade has to make the necessary orientation in the implementation of the new system. Tour operators will, as far as possible,

coordinate the arrangements for outbound package tours under different alerts:

Black	All tours bound for the relevant place will be cancelled.
Red	Tour operators should decide whether to adjust the itineraries to avoid the place of the incident or make other special arrangements.

Tour operators are encouraged to explain to their customers their relevant arrangements so that the customers can get prepared. TIC shall keep in contact with SB and disseminate through the media and its website the latest news on arrangements for package tours bound for places where the OTA is in force.

Recent OTAs for Thailand (Bangkok)

9. On 10 March 2010, SB raised the OTA for Thailand (Bangkok) to Red after the Thai government had imposed "Internal Security Act" for Bangkok and there would be possible large-scale protests and gathering of people in the area in the next few days. Accordingly, TIC made an announcement on its webpage urging travel agents to cancel package tours which departed for Bangkok between 11 and 17 March 2010. Specific arrangements concerning cancellation of package tours, refund to tour participants, etc. were to be made in accordance with TIC's relevant directive to travel agents. As for air-plus-hotel packages which departed for Bangkok between those dates, the travellers were advised to contact their travel agents to work out a solution.

10. On 15 March 2010, TIC announced that as the Red OTA was still in place for Thailand (Bangkok), it suggested travel agents to continue to cancel package tours departing for Bangkok until 23 March 2010.

11. On 23 March 2010, TIC disseminated news on its webpage that package tours would depart for Thailand as normal from 24 March 2010. Major travel agents operating Thailand package tours agreed that they would ask tour participants who had signed up for package tours for Bangkok whether they intended to depart as scheduled, obtain refund or retain the tour fares for future trips. In arriving at the decision, the tour operators concerned had taken into account the latest situation of Bangkok, information provided by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, and also the view of the industry's business partners in Thailand that protests in Bangkok were far away from tourist attractions and hence posed negligible risk to tourists. TIC made similar announcements on 25 and 29 March 2010 for package tours which departed for Bangkok during 27- 31 March and 1 - 5 April 2010 respectively.

12. In view of the rapidly worsening situation in Bangkok, and the several incidents of confrontation, Hong Kong raised the OTA for Thailand (Bangkok) to Black on 10 April 2010, urging Hong Kong residents to avoid all travel to Bangkok. With the deterioration of the situation in Bangkok in early April 2010, a number of

major travel agents agreed to cancel package tours which departed for Bangkok from 9 to 21 April 2010.

13. Hon Paul TSE wrote to the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development on 25 March 2010, querying that TIC's advice that package tours bound for Bangkok would depart as normal was contrary to the Red OTA issued by SB. Hon Paul TSE also queried whether the TIC Board or its Outbound Committee had endorsed the decision. He was also concerned whether the Tourism Commission had provided views to TIC on relevant issues, since the tour participants and tour escorts might not have the insurance cover when the Red OTA was in force.

Latest development

14. At the meeting of the Panel on Economic Development on 29 March 2010, members noted the letter of Hon Paul TSE and expressed concern about the policy of TIC on package tours bound for places where the OTA was in force. They considered that the travelling public paying visits to these places should be informed of the possible risks to personal safety involved and assistance available when there was an incident. The Administration and TIC were requested to brief the Panel on the policy at the Panel meeting on 26 April 2010.

References

Extract from minutes of meeting of the Panel on Security held on 2 December 2008
LC Paper No. CB(2)2100/08-09(01)

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr08-09/english/panels/se/papers/se0706cb2-2100-1-e.pdf>

Administration's paper on Review of Travel Alert and other Assistance to Hong Kong Residents Travelling Abroad for the Panel on Security meeting on 6 July 2009

LC Paper No. CB(2)2054/08-09(10)

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr08-09/english/panels/se/papers/se0706cb2-2054-10-e.pdf>

Minutes of the Panel on Security on 6 July 2009 (page 22)

LC Paper No. CB(2)2495/08-09

<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr08-09/english/panels/se/minutes/se20090706.pdf>

Press release on the Travel Alert issued by the Government for Thailand (Bangkok) on:

10 March 2010 (<http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201003/10/P201003100261.htm>)

10 April 2010 (<http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201004/10/P201004100222.htm>)

Latest News on package tours bound for Bangkok issued by the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong on:

10 March 2010 (http://www.tichk.org/public/website/en/news/2010_03_10_a/html)

15 March 2010 (http://www.tichk.org/public/website/en/news/2010_03_15/html)

23 March 2010 (http://www.tichk.org/public/website/en/news/2010_03_23/html)

25 March 2010 (http://www.tichk.org/public/website/en/news/2010_03_25/html)

29 March 2010 (http://www.tichk.org/public/website/en/news/2010_03_29_a/html)

8 April 2010 (http://www.tichk.org/public/website/en/news/2010_04_08/html)

12 April 2010 (http://www.tichk.org/public/website/en/news/2010_04_12/html)

Hon Paul TSE's letter dated 25 March 2010 to the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development on the decision of the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong regarding package tours bound for Bangkok (Chinese version only)

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<http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr09-10/chinese/panels/eDEV/papers/eDEVcb1-1513-1-c.pdf>

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