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Panel on Security

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 6 July 2010**

Updating and replacement of fire services equipment and apparatus

Purpose

This paper summarizes past discussions of the Panel on Security ("the Panel") on the updating and replacement of fire services equipment and apparatus.

Existing procedures for procuring fire services equipment and apparatus

2. According to the Administration, the Fire Services Department ("FSD") attaches great importance to ensuring the safety of frontline personnel, and has frequently updated and replaced fire services equipment. As fire services equipment are required to suit the actual environment and needs of different places, there is no internationally common set of specifications for such equipment. On the whole, the existing equipment of FSD compare favourably with those used by fire brigades in other places. FSD adopts a forward-looking procurement strategy by closely monitoring new developments in fire services equipment and the availability of new products in the market, so as to further enhance the safety of frontline personnel in fire-fighting and rescue operations. In this respect, the Standard Stowage Review Committee was re-organized in 2008 to evaluate and review all equipment relating to rescue and fire fighting operations on a regular basis.

3. Generally, fire services equipment can be categorized into fire appliances, protective equipment, fire-fighting equipment, rescue equipment and communication systems. In deciding whether to update or replace its equipment, FSD will give regard to a number of factors, including the availability of new products in the market and their reliability, relevant international standards, as well as the service life and maintenance records of the existing equipment. Where necessary, FSD will bid for funding for the procurement following the established mechanism.

4. In the past two years, the Administration allocated a total of about \$600 million for the purchase of fire services equipment, including breathing apparatus, a radio communications system, fire appliances, fire-fighting equipment and rescue equipment. In 2010-2011, the Administration has earmarked about \$170 million for the procurement of various fire services equipment, including fire appliances and rescue equipment. The replacement of 13 000 sets of fire tunics and overtrousers for all fire personnel is one of the items included in the earmarked funding, and the number of fire tunics and overtrousers provided for each fireman will be increased from one to two sets.

5. The replacement of fire services equipment normally involves a number of steps, including drawing up specifications, tendering, manufacture, installation, testing and training. The time required for the entire process depends on factors such as the complexity of the equipment, its specifications, price and the quantity procured. For the procurement of equipment with relatively simple specifications and readily available stock, such as fire fighting hose and protective gloves, the entire procurement process will normally be completed in around six months. As regards fire services equipment which are purchased for the first time, replacement of existing equipment that requires substantial upgrading or changes to the specifications, or procurement of equipment with no readily available stock and where time is needed for manufacturing, the time required to complete the procurement process would be relatively longer. Using the procurement of common fire appliances as an example, the normal lead time required for completing the procurement process would be about 27 to 36 months.

The Administration's proposed measures for expediting the procurement process

6. When the Public Accounts Committee ("PAC") of the Legislative Council ("LegCo") discussed the procurement of ambulances in 2009, the Administration indicated that it would adjust the procurement procedures in order to shorten the lead time required for procuring ambulances, and similar arrangements would apply to the procurement of fire services equipment. Using the procurement of common fire appliances as an example, the following measures to expedite the procurement would be adopted -

- (a) before funding is approved, FSD and relevant departments would make an early start in drawing up the design and specifications for the equipment;
- (b) after finalizing the design and specifications, FSD and relevant departments would immediately kick off the tendering process, with a view to completing all tendering procedures and securing the approval of the tender board before funding is available;
- (c) when funding is available, FSD and relevant departments would award the procurement contract as soon as possible; and

- (d) where possible, FSD would request the manufacturer to advance the delivery of some of the equipment so as to facilitate the provision of training at an earlier time. This would enable frontline personnel to become familiar with the operation of the new equipment before full delivery.

7. According to the Administration, the new arrangements serve to expedite the entire procurement process by making an early start on the time-consuming but unavoidable procedures, such as drawing up tender specifications, preparing tender documents and tendering. With the adoption of the above improvement measures, the entire process for procuring fire appliances can be shortened by about a year. These measures will also apply to most fire services equipment, especially those requiring frequent replacement.

Deliberations of the Panel

8. At its meeting on 4 May 2010, the Panel discussed the existing procedures for procuring fire services equipment and apparatus, and the Administration's proposed measures for expediting the procurement processes. The Panel also received views from the Hong Kong Fire Services Department Staffs General Association ("FSDSGA") and the Hong Kong Fire Services Officers Association ("FSOA") on the matter. Members' views and concerns are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Lengthy time and process for the procurement and updating of fire services equipment

9. Members expressed grave concern about the work safety of firemen. Some members considered the procedure for procurement of various fire services equipment, including new breathing apparatus, new digital radio communication system and fire tunics and overtrousers for replacement, cumbersome. Citing the new breathing apparatus as an example, they considered it unacceptably long for the Administration to have taken more than three years to put the new apparatus into full operational use since the time they were identified as suitable for use by FSD. These members asked whether FSD would consider adopting a more flexible arrangement for the introduction of new equipment in future and accord priority to those firemen stationed in high-risk areas for receiving training and using the new equipment, instead of waiting for all staff to have been trained before using the new equipment.

10. The Administration responded that it attached great importance to ensuring the safety of frontline fire-fighting personnel and providing firemen with safe and reliable equipment and facilities. Besides taking measures to ensure that fire services equipment were under proper maintenance and in effective operation, the Administration regularly replaced and procured more advanced equipment taking into account FSD's suggestion, so as to further enhance the protection for frontline personnel. Generally, the existing equipment of FSD compared favourably with those

used by fire brigades overseas.

11. The Administration advised that in order to expedite the procurement process, FSD and relevant departments had reached a consensus to make an early start on the initial procurement procedures, including the drafting of specifications and tendering. This would enable FSD and relevant departments to award the procurement contract as soon as possible upon securing funding approval, which would in turn allow the suppliers to commence the manufacturing or delivery procedures immediately. With the adoption of the improvement measures as mentioned in paragraph 6 above, the entire process for procuring fire equipment or appliances could be shortened by about a year. To further expedite the procurement process, FSD would, wherever possible, adopt a phased delivery approach for large-scale procurement of equipment to enable early commencement of training. In this regard, the Administration would request suppliers to deliver the new equipment by batches wherever practicable. FSD would conduct testing on the new equipment that arrived in early shipments and, depending on operational need and the actual situation, distribute them for use by firemen who had already been trained. In deciding whether the new equipment could be introduced in batches, FSD would consider a number of factors, including the need to maintain uniformity in overall operation; whether the parallel use of old and new equipment could be accommodated in actual operation and whether such arrangement would seriously affect the operational procedures; as well as its impact on training, maintenance, logistics support and use of resources.

12. Some members were very concerned about the interoperability among different makes/models of the same equipment/apparatus produced by different manufacturers. They sought clarification on whether there were any issues of incompatibility between different makes/models of the same equipment/apparatus currently in use.

13. In reply, the Administration reiterated that FSD kept on reviewing and identifying more advanced tools and equipment to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of fire fighting and rescue operations and to enhance the safety of frontline personnel. The Administration stressed that in the procurement of new fire services equipment to replace existing equipment, it was necessary to observe the established procedures for procurement in order to ensure fairness and impartiality. While procurement had to be carried out through a worldwide tendering to comply with the Government's Stores and Procurement Regulations, there was a possibility that the same type of equipment acquired at different times might be supplied by different manufacturers. However, there should not be any incompatibility in the functions of the equipment.

14. Members noted that FSDSGA and FSOA had for years been urging the FSD management to provide the operational/training manuals on various fire fighting and rescue equipment in both Chinese and English, so as to help frontline personnel to familiarize themselves, in the shortest possible time, with the principles and detailed operation of the equipment and apparatus. Members expressed concern about the slow progress in the preparation of the Chinese translation of the manuals. Some members

considered that the Administration should explore the option of outsourcing, in order to speed up the preparation of the Chinese translation of the operational/training manuals on various fire fighting and rescue equipment.

15. The Administration responded that FSD had acknowledged the requests of the two staff associations, and requested the suppliers to provide both Chinese and English versions of operation manuals along with the new equipment.

Shortage of manpower and expertise for undertaking procurement-related duties

16. Members noted from the deputations that at present, the procurement of fire-fighting and rescue equipment was handled by only two staff specifically and exclusively for such duties. The procurement of other equipment was part of the duties of some staff holding regular office in different divisions or units while taking up the procurement-related work as extra responsibilities. There were cases where user acceptance tests on new products and equipment were neither conducted by professionals nor technically qualified personnel. Members were deeply concerned about the way how FSD assigned the duties of testing and commissioning of new equipment to different units, and the serious shortage of manpower and expertise for undertaking the testing, commissioning and training of frontline personnel in the use of new equipment and apparatus upon their delivery.

17. In response, the Administration explained that the procurement-related duties were mainly distributed amongst a number of administrative and support units under the Headquarters Command, and the personnel assigned to undertake the checking and testing had been trained in the relevant fields with technical knowledge and practical experience to carry out the acceptance tests of specific equipment. The Administration informed members that FSD would review its procurement strategies and procedures. Where necessary, it would consider applying for provision of additional resources in accordance with the established procedures so as to increase the manpower support for handling procurement-related duties.

18. Notwithstanding the response of the Administration, members considered that the FSD management should show its determination to solve the workload problem of its staff. Some members called on the Administration to take into account the views and suggestions of FSDSGA and FSOA, notably the provision of additional manpower and the setting up of a dedicated team for handling procurement-related work.

19. The Administration responded that the FSD management was fully aware of the pressure and heavy workload faced by frontline personnel, which had been brought about by rising public expectation for better services. In reviewing its procurement strategies and procedures, FSD would consider all relevant issues including the merits and the viability of setting up a dedicated team to cope with the workload arising from procurement and replacement of fire services equipment. FSD would continue to monitor closely its manpower requirement and service needs and explore ways to optimize the deployment of resources to meet future challenges. In the process, FSD

would enhance communication with the staff side.

Efficiency and effectiveness of Fire Services Department's existing procurement management system

20. Some members noted that the existing computer system in FSD only captured raw data and failed to consolidate the data submitted by different divisions or Fire Commands to give a full and coherent picture of the flows and availability of various fire services equipment, as in the case of fire tunics and overtrousers for all firemen. These members considered FSD's existing stores procurement and stock management systems far from efficient and effective. They suggested that FSD should establish an integrated computer system to centralize the information on the usage, stocking and distribution of various equipment, which would in the end allow information exchange and data analysis. In addition, FSD should develop a new computerized procurement and supply system with enhanced functionalities which could help improve FSD's efficiency and effectiveness in inventory management.

21. The Administration responded that FSD was reviewing its existing procurement management system to see whether the system could cope with the prevailing needs of the department. If justified, FSD would propose to replace the existing system with a new procurement system with enhanced functionalities which would enable FSD to better monitor and control the stock of equipment and improve its capability in data retrieval, so as to facilitate management decision-making and strategic planning.

Need for an independent study on the procurement and management issues of FSD

22. Some members expressed serious concern as to whether the inefficiency and confusion in the procurement of fire services equipment was only a manifestation or symptom of a broader and more fundamental problem in FSD with its management and administration. These members proposed that the Efficiency Unit of the Government could conduct a study on the procurement and management issues for FSD.

23. The Administration advised that in the light of the recommendations made by PAC and with a view to strengthening FSD's internal information and resource management functions, the assistance of the Efficiency Unit had been enlisted to conduct a study on another related subject of improvement to the processes and procedures regarding the procurement of ambulances. The study, which commenced in September 2009, had been completed. The Administration had taken on board the advice of the Efficiency Unit and FSD had adjusted the procurement procedure in order to shorten the lead time required for procuring ambulances. Similar arrangements also applied to the procurement of fire services equipment. Citing the procurement of fire tunics and overtrousers as an example, the drawing up of tender specifications had been done well in advance, such that the procurement contract could be awarded right after funding approval.

Latest development

24. In response to the Panel's suggestion for the Efficiency Unit to conduct a study on the procurement and management issues for FSD, the Efficiency Unit has advised in its reply dated 17 May 2010 that the Administration had also invited the Efficiency Unit to undertake a study into a number of management issues relating to FSD, including those suggested by the Panel. The Efficiency Unit had accepted the Administration's invitation and would proceed with the detailed arrangements for the study, including the appointment of a dedicated team to carry out the work.

Relevant papers

25. Members are invited to access the website of the Legislative Council at <http://www.legco.gov.hk> to view the relevant paper and minutes of meeting.

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