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Panel on Security

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 1 March 2011**

Outbound travel alert for Hong Kong travellers

Purpose

This paper summarizes past discussions by the Panel on Security ("the Panel") on the Outbound Travel Alert ("OTA") System for Hong Kong travellers.

Background

2. Following the tsunami in South Asia in 2004, the Security Bureau ("SB") formulated a three-tier "Contingency Plan for Emergency Response Operations outside the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region" ("ERO") for providing assistance to Hong Kong residents whose personal safety was affected by sudden incidents outside Hong Kong. Under Tier One where the risk to personal safety was relatively low, the Assistance to Hong Kong Residents Unit ("AHU") of the Immigration Department ("ImmD") would provide assistance to Hong Kong residents. When the risk to personal safety became higher or if the scale of the required assistance expanded, SB would activate ERO Tier Two. Together with other relevant bureaux and departments, an inter-departmental coordinating team would oversee the assistance rendered to Hong Kong residents. Where the incident had widespread impact on or poses significant threat to personal safety, SB might escalate to ERO Tier Three and activate the Emergency Monitoring and Support Centre to monitor, support and coordinate the responses.

3. Owing to protest activities which led to the closure of the Bangkok International Airport from end November to early December 2008, a large

number of overseas visitors were stranded in Bangkok. There were views that the Government should have made a quicker decision to arrange chartered flights to bring back the stranded Hong Kong residents. There were also calls for the Government to better prepare for arranging "chartered flights" or "chartered seats" should similar occasions arise again in future. Despite the Administration's issuance of travel warnings in light of the developments of the unrest in Bangkok during the Easter holiday in April 2009, some people considered that the travel advices/warnings issued by the Government should be clearer and more standardized. The Government subsequently reviewed the arrangements.

Outbound Travel Alert System

4. The Administration announced on 30 September 2009 the implementation of the OTA System with effect from 20 October 2010. The OTA System adopts three colours, namely, Amber, Red and Black, to differentiate the levels of risk to facilitate the public to consider making corresponding trip arrangements, such as adjusting travel plans or exercising caution at the region concerned. The Panel discussed the OTA system at its meetings on 6 July 2009, 20 October 2009 and 19 October 2010.

5. A member enquired whether an employee could refuse to go to a place on which the Administration had issued a Red or Black alert, if he was so requested by his employer. The member considered that the Administration should provide clear guidelines on work arrangements in case of Black alert for the reference of employers and employees. The member took the view that if it was not provided in the employment contract that the employer might arrange for the employee to undertake overseas duties in case of Black alert, it should not be treated as a breach of contract if the employee refused to go to a place with risk to personal safety.

6. The Administration advised that it was aware that employees might be required to visit a particular place to undertake work-related activities even if there were signs of threat in the relevant place which might affect their personal safety. The Administration encouraged employers to discuss with employees to draw up prior work arrangements and contingency measures for situations where Black or Red alert was issued in order to avoid unnecessary dispute and confusion, similar to what was done in anticipation of typhoon or rainstorm warnings. Nevertheless, the Administration would refer the suggestion to the relevant bureau for consideration.

7. Some members asked why Taiwan, Macao and the Mainland were not covered by the OTA System.

8. The Administration responded that it had consulted the travel industry and made reference to international practices before implementing the OTA System, which covered 60 countries or territories which were more popular travel destinations for Hong Kong residents. Taiwan, Macao and the Mainland were not included in the system. When there were signs of threat in these places that might affect the personal safety of Hong Kong residents, SB would assess and consider the need to issue travel advice/warnings taking into account factors such as the nature, level and duration of the threat, and provide assistance to Hong Kong residents on the scene if the situation so warranted.

9. A member asked whether the Administration would establish in advance with overseas governments, particularly those countries and places which were frequently visited by Hong Kong people, a formal mechanism and procedures for handling unexpected incidents. The member considered that for places posing risk or threat to personal safety, including those cities/countries against which a travel alert under the Outbound Travel Alert System was issued, the Government should promulgate more frequently first-hand information on the latest development in the affected place, together with the travel advice, to facilitate travellers to make an informed decision when planning their trips to these places.

10. The Administration advised that the close communication between the Hong Kong Government and the Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China in Hong Kong, as well as the assistance rendered by the Chinese Diplomatic and Consular Missions abroad were an integral part of HKSAR's emergency response system. The hostage-taking incident in Manila in August 2010 had demonstrated the effectiveness of the enhanced mechanism. The Administration would continue to optimize the mechanism, with a view to providing appropriate and more effective assistance to Hong Kong residents in distress outside the territory. In respect of strengthening the existing mechanism of providing assistance to Hong Kong residents overseas, the Administration maintained an open mind on proposals put forward by members, including the inclusion of more and related information on the government website to better facilitate travellers to understand more easily the threat to personal safety when visiting places against which a travel alert was issued.

11. Members were informed that ImmD aimed to complete upgrading of its "1868" hotline system by the end of 2010 and roll out the electronic network for residents to register their itineraries and emergency contact means before

travelling abroad. The Administration had also signed memoranda of understanding with relevant airlines confirming the arrangements with respect to reserving seats on scheduled flights or arranging chartered flights to bring back Hong Kong residents in case of needs and on a priority basis.

Relevant Council question

12. Hon Paul TSE raised a question on the OTA System at the Council meeting of 21 April 2010. The question and the Administration's reply are in the **Appendix**.

Relevant papers

13. Members may access the LegCo website (<http://www.legco.gov.hk>) for details of the paper and minutes of meeting.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
24 February 2011

Press Releases

LCQ10: Outbound Travel Alert System

Following is a written reply by the Acting Secretary for Security, Mr Lai Tung-kwok, to a question by the Hon Paul Tse Wai-chun in the Legislative Council today (April 21):

Question:

Both Chile and Taiwan, which have recently been hit by serious earthquakes, are not included in the list of 60 "countries" covered by the "Outbound Travel Alert System" ("OTAS") of the Security Bureau, and Taiwan in particular is a popular tourist destination for Hong Kong people. Some members of the public in Hong Kong who have joined package tours to Taiwan have relayed to me that they approached the travel agents to request for withdrawal from the tours after the earthquake, but encountered various hindrances; later these people sought assistance from the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong and the Security Bureau but to no avail, as they both shirked their responsibilities. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) of the criteria based on which the Security Bureau determines the coverage of OTAS;

(b) of the reasons for not including Chile and Taiwan in the coverage of OTAS; and when these two popular tourist destinations for Hong Kong people will be included; and

(c) whether it will expeditiously review OTAS again and include in the system as far as practicable all tourist "destinations" and "countries" which Hong Kong people may visit?

Reply:

President,

Security Bureau (SB) launched the Outbound Travel Alert (OTA) System in October 2009. The OTA uses Amber, Red and Black to represent three levels of threat, so as to facilitate residents to better understand the possible risk to their personal safety when travelling overseas. Before launching the OTA, SB had exchanged views with the trades, including the travel industry, so that they could formulate corresponding measures in line with the launching of the system.

Our replies to the questions raised by Hon Tse are as follows:

(a) The OTA covers 60 countries that are more popular destinations for Hong Kong residents for travel, business or visiting relatives. We had made reference to the views of the travel industry when determining the coverage of the OTA.

(b) and (c) The OTA does not cover Mainland, Macao and Taiwan. This is similar to the arrangement in other places, where travel alert will not be issued for different areas within a country. However, the OTA webpage has hyperlinks to facilitate Hong Kong residents to access to the travel risk information database compiled by the National Tourism Administration, which covers the Mainland, Macao and Taiwan. Our webpage also has hyperlinks to the databases compiled by the governments of Australia, Canada and UK, to facilitate Hong Kong residents to

obtain the travel risk information for overseas countries not covered by the OTA.

The OTA has been in place for just six months. We will review the arrangements (including the coverage) in light of actual experience.

The SAR Government will endeavor to provide appropriate assistance to Hong Kong residents in distress outside Hong Kong regardless of whether they are at a place covered by OTA.

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