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Panel on Security

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 3 January 2012**

Replacement of Customs vessels

Purpose

This paper summarizes past discussions of the Panel on Security ("the Panel") on the replacement of the vessels of the Customs and Excise Department ("C&ED").

Background

2. The existing C&ED fleet comprises 19 vessels including five sector patrol launches ("SPLs"), eight inflatable crafts, four high speed pursuit crafts and two shallow water speed boats. Each type of vessels plays a specific role in detecting and suppressing smuggling activities in Hong Kong waters, since smugglers use various means of conveyance, including fishing or cargo vessels, mechanized sampans and speed boats, and employ different tactics to evade enforcement detection.

3. SPLs perform round-the-clock anti-smuggling patrol in Hong Kong waters while the inflatable crafts attached to them are for near-shore sea patrol and diving operations. SPLs maintain C&ED's regular presence in Hong Kong waters to deter and interdict smuggling activities. They also act as C&ED's command centre during joint anti-smuggling operations with the Police and provide support to other C&ED vessels. As for the high speed pursuit crafts and shallow water speed boats, they are specifically deployed for the pursuit and interception of speed boats and mechanized sampans suspected to be engaged in smuggling activities. Details of the functions and areas of deployment of the C&ED fleet provided by the Administration in 2007 are at **Appendix I**.

Deliberations of the Panel

4. The Panel discussed the proposed replacement of three Damen Mark III type ("DMIII") SPLs, which were commissioned in 1986, at its meeting on 6 March 2007. The deliberations are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Design and speed of SPLs

5. Members were informed that the normal life expectancy of steel-hulled vessels in the Government fleet was about 20 years, after which the vessels would be beyond economical repair and no longer be able to provide reliable support to sea-borne operations. The Administration proposed to replace C&ED's three SPLs by 2009.

6. Information was sought on whether the replacement vessels had smaller displacement weights which would enable them to operate at a higher speed compared to the existing vessels.

7. According to the Administration, the displacement weights of the replacement vessels were roughly the same as those of the existing DMIII SPLs, but the replacement vessels were four to five metres longer than the existing ones. The new vessels could operate at a higher speed mainly because they had higher engine power.

8. Concern was raised as to whether the maximum speed of 25 knots of the replacement SPLs was sufficient to meet the operational needs of anti-smuggling operations.

9. According to the Administration, the new SPLs, which could operate at a speed of 25 knots, would be able to pursue and intercept fishing vessels and river trade vessels in Hong Kong waters which normally travelled at a speed of not more than 20 knots. C&ED's high speed pursuit crafts and shallow water speed boats, which could reach a speed of 49 and 39 knots respectively, would conduct pursuit and interception of target speed boats and mechanized sampans during anti-smuggling operations. This mode of operation had proven to be effective in curbing sea smuggling activities.

10. Given the fact that C&ED vessels might be exposed to strong wind and rough sea waves during operations, an enquiry was raised over the design wind load of the replacement vessels.

11. Members were advised that while the Government vessels in general could operate under strong wind of Force 6, the replacement SPLs for C&ED could operate under gale wind of Force 12 on the Beaufort Scale, which was roughly equivalent to the wind condition when Typhoon Signal Number 8 was hoisted. The replacement vessels could undertake operations even under strong wind and rough sea conditions.

Considerations for procurement

12. Concerns were raised over whether C&ED had conducted any review on the current and future operational needs of its vessel fleet and the considerations for procuring the three replacement SPLs.

13. According to the Administration, C&ED had set up an internal working group in 2005 to review the strategy in combating sea smuggling activities, including the role and functions of the C&ED fleet. Having taken into account relevant considerations, the working group concluded that the existing anti-smuggling strategy had addressed the sea smuggling situation and catered for the environment of Hong Kong waters, and had effectively curtailed such illicit activities. In addition, each type of vessels in the C&ED fleet had a specific role in fighting against smuggling activities. As such, it was necessary for C&ED to maintain the existing strength and functions of the C&ED fleet. As the three existing DMIII SPLs would soon reach the end of their serviceable life, the working group had recommended that they be replaced with three new launches. To support C&ED's operational needs in combating sea smuggling activities, the model and facilities of the replacement launches should be similar to those of the two patrol launches commissioned in 2000.

14. Members were informed that the non-recurrent cost for the three replacement SPLs with the necessary equipment on board was estimated to be \$117 million. The estimated annual recurrent cost for the three replacement vessels was \$12.2 million. The higher recurrent cost of \$2.1 million per annum was to cover the additional maintenance cost for the larger vessels, high-powered engines, and more advanced navigational and operational equipment, and the higher fuel cost arising from higher vessel power.

Control of sea smuggling activities

15. Members were concerned about the severity of sea smuggling activities in Hong Kong waters, particularly the problem of smuggling unmanifested freshwater fishes into Hong Kong. Information was sought on whether C&ED had sufficient resources and manpower to put sea smuggling activities under control.

16. According to the Administration, C&ED and the Police worked closely in the exchange of intelligence and information about sea smuggling activities and would undertake joint anti-smuggling operations where necessary. Cases detected by the Police would also be referred to C&ED for follow-up investigations. As regards the smuggling of unmanifested freshwater fishes into Hong Kong, C&ED, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and Mainland law enforcement agencies had strengthened their exchange of intelligence in combating these smuggling activities. Given the long shoreline of Hong Kong and the price differences in respect of frequently smuggled items between Hong Kong and the Mainland, attempts at sea smuggling activities would likely continue. Through the efforts of various parties, sea smuggling activities were kept under control. C&ED would maintain its vigorous enforcement on vessels in Hong Kong waters to combat smuggling activities. In 2006, C&ED had intercepted some 13 000 vessels for inspection.

17. The Finance Committee approved the funding request at its meeting on 25 May 2007.

Relevant papers

18. A list of the relevant papers on the Legislative Council website is in **Appendix II**.

Types and Functions of Existing Customs Launches/Craft

<i>Type</i>	<i>Model</i>	<i>Qty.</i>	<i>Year commissioned</i>	<i>Functions</i>
Sector patrol launch	# Damen Mark III	3	1986	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ To perform anti-smuggling patrols in Hong Kong waters, broadly divided into five areas, namely North-west, South-west, South-east, North-east and Mirs Bay; ◇ To carry out strike and search operations on suspicious river trading vessels, fishing vessels, etc; ◇ To act as the command centre during joint anti-smuggling operations; ◇ To serve as the observation and case processing platform; ◇ To provide logistic support to other types of Customs vessels; and ◇ To act as the training facility for the launch crew of Customs vessels.
	Challenger	2	2000	
Inflatable craft (normally attached to sector patrol launches)	Avon Searider SR5.4M	5	2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ To provide near-shore and shallow sea patrols in Hong Kong waters; and ◇ To be used for diving operations.
	Avon Searider SR6.0M	3	2000	

<i>Type</i>	<i>Model</i>	<i>Qty.</i>	<i>Year commissioned</i>	<i>Functions</i>
High speed pursuit craft	FB 55	4	2003	✧ To conduct pursuit and interception of speed boats and mechanised sampans in the areas off Mirs Bay, Deep Bay, North-east and North-west sectors in Hong Kong waters.
Shallow water speed boat	Boston Whaler 10M	2	1999	✧ To conduct pursuit and interception of speed boats and mechanised sampans, normally in shallow waters.
Total:		19		

Launches proposed to be replaced.

**Relevant papers on
Replacement of Customs fleet**

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Security	6.3.2007 (Item IV)	<u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u>
Finance Committee	25.5.2007 (Item No. 3 - FCR(2007-08)12)	<u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u>

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