

For discussion on
10 July 2018

**Legislative Council Panel on Security
Police's Handling of Explosive Objects and
Matters Requiring Public Attention**

Introduction

This paper aims to give an introduction on the Police's work on handling explosive objects and relevant matters requiring public attention.

Background

2. According to section 10 of the Police Force Ordinance (Cap. 232), the Police have the responsibility to take lawful measures to maintain public order and public safety, as well as to safeguard life and property. On occasions where an incident causing potential danger to others occurs or is about to occur, the Police will assess the circumstances on the scene and exercise professional judgement for taking appropriate actions to ensure public safety and public order.

3. Under Hong Kong laws, acts involving explosion of explosive objects or bomb threats, etc. are very serious offences. According to section 53 of the Crimes Ordinance (Cap. 200), any person who causes an explosion likely to endanger life or property shall be liable to imprisonment for life. Section 54 of the same ordinance also stipulates that any person who attempts to cause an explosion, or makes or keeps explosive with intent to endanger life or property, whether any explosion does or does not take place and whether any injury to person or property has been actually caused or not, shall be liable to imprisonment for 20 years. Furthermore, according to section 55 of the ordinance, the making or possession of explosive, unless for a lawful object, shall be liable to imprisonment for 14 years.

4. According to section 28 of the Offences against the Person Ordinance (Cap. 212), any person who causes bodily injury by gunpowder or any other explosive substance shall be liable to imprisonment for life. Section 29 of the same ordinance also stipulates that any person who causes gunpowder or explosive substance to explode with intent to do some grievous bodily harm, whether any bodily injury is effected or not, shall be liable to imprisonment for life.

5. According to section 28 of the Public Order Ordinance (Cap. 245), any person who places any article or substance in any place whatever, or dispatches any article or substance with the intention of inducing some other person to believe that it is likely to explode or ignite and thereby cause personal injury or damage to property, shall be guilty of an offence. In addition, any person who communicates any information which he knows or believes to be false to another person with the intention of inducing him or any other person to believe that a bomb or other article or substance liable to explode or ignite is present in any place whatever shall be guilty of an offence. The maximum penalty for such person upon conviction is a fine of \$150,000 and imprisonment for five years.

Explosive Ordnance Disposal Bureau

6. Established in 1972 under the Operations Wing, the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Bureau ("EOD") of the Hong Kong Police Force ("HKPF") is mainly responsible for handling all illegal explosive objects (other than small-calibre ammunition), including weapons made with chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear ("CBRN") agents, in Hong Kong. EOD is called out on average once or twice a week. Items handled include illegal fireworks, various types of ordnance left behind from World War II, etc. Apart from handling explosive objects on land, EOD officers are also responsible for handling explosive devices and conventional ordnance found underwater.

7. Currently, EOD has an establishment of 11 full-time staff, including one Senior Bomb Disposal Officer, three Bomb Disposal Officers and two Assistant Bomb Disposal Officers. In addition, EOD

has around 30 cadre officers who can provide assistance in operations as necessary. All EOD officers have received professional training and are all recruited internally within the HKPF. They have to pass a seven-week selection process and a one-year probation period before they are qualified for handling improvised explosive devices and become cadre bomb disposal officers. In the subsequent three years, they will learn to use professional equipment for handling bombs, receive training on the operation and application of explosive objects, as well as take physical fitness and simulated on-scene practical assessments. Meanwhile, they have to undergo regular training every month and take annual examinations to ensure that they maintain professional standards. Those with outstanding performance will be selected to become full-time officers and undergo trainings on disposal of conventional munitions, CBRN weapons, etc. Bomb disposal officers are trained for four years while bomb disposal assistants are trained for two years. EOD also make use of professional equipment, such as bomb disposal robots, to assist its officers in examining and rendering safe of the explosive objects in remote control mode.

Hazards of explosive objects

8. Explosive objects, even if they are not large in size, can cause severe damage. Terrorists and crime syndicates often use booby-trap devices with explosives and unstable explosives to launch terrorist attacks, thereby causing mass casualties. In addition, all unexploded ordnance, such as wartime air-dropped bombs, still contain deadly ammunition and the chemical components therein may have even changed over time, adding to their unpredictability and hazards. If such bombs are not properly handled and the risks arising from explosion not properly managed, they will pose grave threats to the lives and properties of the public.

9. Given that Hong Kong was extensively attacked during World War II, conventional munitions ranging from grenades to large air-dropped bombs are found from time to time. For instance, in 2014, an air-dropped bomb weighing around 1 000 pounds, which is the second largest bomb ever found in Hong Kong, was found at a construction site

in Happy Valley. In 2017, a wartime air-dropped bomb weighing around 500 pounds was found in Pokfulam. In the same year, a wartime mortar bomb was also found in Ma On Shan. This year, three air-dropped bombs dropped by the United States Air Force, each weighing around 1 000 pounds, were found at different times at the construction site in Wan Chai of the Mass Transit Railway's (MTR) Shatin to Central Link (SCL). Such unexploded ordnance, usually in an unstable state and contain highly deadly explosives, are extremely dangerous.

10. The handling of explosive objects is an extremely dangerous and arduous task. EOD officers must render safe the bombs precisely without error, otherwise the fragmentation, heat and blast waves generated from the explosion may cause serious casualties and damage. In the past few years, accidents related to handling of bombs had occurred in Germany and Hungary, killing a number of bomb disposal experts on duty and causing serious damage to the communities nearby. The public safety risks posed by bombs should not be overlooked.

Police's handling of explosive objects

11. In performing the duty of handling explosive objects, the Police's prime concern is the safety of the personnel concerned and the public. On receipt of any report on discovery of explosive objects, the Police will immediately deploy EOD officers to the scene to assess the risk, and cordon off the scene and its surrounding area to conduct assessment as necessary.

12. The Police's assessment covers various factors including the type, nature, composition and condition of the explosive object, as well as the on-site environment (such as the location where the explosive object is found, buildings in the vicinity, seabed environment and temperature). It forms the base on which they will make a judgement on the safest and effective way to handle the explosive object and the area that will be affected in case of explosion.

13. Upon ascertaining the possible threat caused by the explosion, the Police may expand or change the cordoned area, including nearby buildings and roads, as necessary and evacuate the residents and shopkeepers nearby. Generally speaking, the Police will divide the

scene into zones that require full evacuation (i.e. in the closest proximity to the explosive object) and zones that require partial evacuation (i.e. farther away from the explosive object but still subject to certain danger). The Police will maintain close liaison with the media and locals for timely dissemination of the latest news. Besides, the Police will, in collaboration with relevant departments, arrange for evacuation of people nearby and arrange for those affected to take refuge in temporary shelters when necessary.

14. In light of the nature and condition of the explosive object, EOD officers will render it safe with appropriate means. For instance, in three recent operations at the construction site in Wan Chai of the MTR's SLC, EOD officers first surrounded the air-dropped bombs with a large number of sand bags and water sand bags as protection measures to absorb the heat and air pressure released from the burning of the explosives. They then cut open the outer casing of each bomb using abrasive water cutting method and burnt the explosives therein. Firemen also stood by at scene during the operations in case an explosion occurred. During the three operations mentioned above, the personnel concerned performed professionally and defused the crises successfully in 36, 24 and 17 hours respectively, without causing any casualty or damage to property.

15. Apart from conventional munitions, EOD also has to handle improvised explosive devices of various forms and produced in ever-changing ways. EOD regularly exchanges intelligence with more than 50 countries and regions through the International Bomb Data Centre, so as to grasp the latest modus operandi of terrorist attacks internationally and the ways of handling different kinds of bombs.

Matters requiring public attention

16. Should a member of the public find any suspected explosive object, he/she should never touch or move it but should keep away from it immediately and report to the Police at once to avoid danger. As some of the explosive objects (particularly improvised explosive devices) may be controlled by a remote device, members of the public should not use wireless communication devices or mobile phones within 25 metres of the object, or else the radio waves may interfere with the object and increase the risk of explosion.

17. Members of the public should also pay attention to the Police's announcements and follow the instructions of police officers so that the Police can promptly perform their duty of handling explosive objects. If the Police require the residents and shopkeepers nearby to evacuate, the people affected should co-operate with the Police and leave the cordoned areas as instructed as quickly as possible. It is because the Police will only handle the explosive objects concerned after the cordoned areas have been completely cleared, so as to minimise the possible casualties in case of an explosion. In this regard, the Police will strengthen communication with the community and step up promotion in co-operation with all parties to enhance the public's awareness on what to do when they come across explosive objects.

18. The construction industry may discover wartime bombs buried underground during works at construction sites. The industry may consider providing training for workers on the identification of suspicious items and the proper ways of handling. In this respect, the Police also render appropriate assistance such as organising briefings and demonstrations for workers, so as to enhance their awareness and knowledge of bombs. Moreover, the Police will conduct drills with the management authorities of critical infrastructures such as the airport and the railway system, through which the personnel concerned should familiarise themselves with the proper handling of suspicious items, escape routes, effective conduct of emergency broadcasts and evacuation, etc. as far as possible, in order to raise the awareness and responsiveness of the relevant bodies in handling incidents involving explosive objects as well as to protect the safety of themselves and the public.

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