

Legislative Council Panel on Home Affairs

Rice Distribution Activities during Yu Lan Festival

Purpose

1. This paper informs Members of the proposals to improve the arrangements for rice distribution activities during the Yu Lan Festival in the coming years.

Background

2. The Government is very concerned about the incidents that occurred during the Yu Lan Festival rice distribution events in August and early September this year. On 5 September, the Home Affairs Bureau, together with the relevant Government departments, convened an urgent meeting with the Yu Lan organizers responsible for the rice distribution activities to discuss how to improve the arrangements for distributing the “blessed rice”. The Government agreed with the Yu Lan organizers at the meeting that whilst the tradition of distributing the “blessed rice” should be maintained, the organization of the events must be properly regulated and improved.

3. On 9 September 2005, the Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services held a special meeting to discuss the subject of rice distribution activities during the Yu Lan Festival. Members expressed concern over the existing arrangements for the Yu Lan rice distribution events and recommended that the Government should discuss with Yu Lan Festival organizations as soon as possible measures to improve the arrangements. Measures such as distributing rice bags of a smaller size should be explored to reduce the number of elderly people queuing up for the event and help minimise the risk of the elderly being injured. In the past three months, the Government has met with various Yu Lan Festival organizations to discuss new guidelines for rice distribution with a view to ensuring the safety of the elderly and avoiding the recurrence of chaos or unfortunate incidents during the rice distribution activities.

Rice Distribution Activities

4. We note that while the rising number of people queuing up for the “blessed rice” in recent years may be attributable to an ageing population and improvements in telecommunication technology, it would appear that the portion of the “blessed rice” bags (each weighing some 5 kg) and the distribution of cash in the form of “lai see” or gifts by the organizers have also greatly enhanced the attractiveness of these events. Media reports and anecdotal evidence have also indicated that significant number of elderly people had been traveling across districts, or queuing up overnight, for the “blessed rice” as well as the “lai see” and gifts offered by the Yu Lan organizations. These practices are likely to pose a serious threat to the health of the elderly, and the huge congregation of crowds can also easily lead to public order problems.

5. The Government has always respected traditional activities in the community and also believes that the strong tradition underpinning rice distribution activities during the Yu Lan Festival must be maintained while working out improvements on their mode of distribution. The Government is aware that the primary purpose of the activities held during the Yu Lan Festival is to pray for the well-being of the organization, while the distribution of rice is only a symbolic act of blessing, and not a charitable activity in itself. On this basis, the Government has put forward a series of guidelines to ensure the smooth implementation of rice distribution activities during the Yu Lan Festival.

Proposed Guidelines

6. To improve the organization of rice distribution events in the future, the Government has proposed to impose new conditions on the Yu Lan Festival organizations who wish to use the Government venues or land for rice distribution during the Festival. To the best of our knowledge, a total of 54 Yu Lan rice distribution events took place in August and September this year. Some 56% of these events were held in venues under the jurisdiction of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD); about 20% in venues under the Housing Department; 5% in unallocated Government land and around 19% in private venues. A breakdown on their distribution is at Annex A. To enhance the rice distribution events in future, the Government proposes that a set of new guidelines (as at Annex B) should be issued to the organizers intending to hold rice distribution activities in Government venues or land during the Yu Lan Festival.

7. As distributing the rice bags for blessings is the main theme of this traditional activity, the Government recommends that the weight of each rice bag be kept at not more than 1kg, while cash or gift items other than rice bags should not be allowed during the rice distribution event. This requirement is expected to reduce the attractiveness of the rice distribution activities to the elderly population and discourage them from queuing up for the “blessed rice” for long hours, hence minimizing risks that may be associated with congregation of large crowds. Moreover, the Yu Lan organizations must also provide adequate insurance cover for third party liability throughout the event.

8. In addition, we would propose to require the Yu Lan organizations to employ security guards to relieve the burden of crowd control on Government departments, in particular, the Police. As regards the provision of shelter, volunteer helpers, first aid services and mobile toilets at the venue, most Yu Lan organizations have been able to comply with such requirements in the past.

Consultation

9. Over the past two months, we have, through the various District Offices, sounded out the Yu Lan organizations on the proposed new conditions to be imposed on them when organizing the rice distribution activities in the coming year. These organizations were generally amicable to the proposals which were developed with the safety and welfare of the elderly in mind. Where the events were to be held at a private venue, we have also sought the agreement of the respective Yu Lan organization to comply with the proposed guidelines if they anticipate that the event would attract a considerable number of elderly people.

10. We have also consulted the social welfare sector, including the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, about the proposed guidelines at Annex B. The non-governmental organizations in the social welfare sector have generally agreed to our proposed measures to improve rice distribution during Yu Lan Festival, and have also undertaken to render assistance in the following areas:

- (a) to identify the elderly in the district who are particularly in

need of help, including those residing on their own, without family care or in poor health;

- (b) to assist in the distribution of the residual “blessed rice” to the elderly who need special help (for example, arranging for the rice bags to be distributed within their centres or at appropriate locations within the district);
- (c) to assist in organizing volunteers to help distribute the residual “blessed rice” to home-bound elderly people.

11. We are prepared to facilitate discussions between the Yu Lan organizers and the social welfare organizations in the district through the assistance of the various District Offices, to discuss the most appropriate arrangements for distributing the residual “blessed rice” to the elderly identified.

Community Education and Publicity

12. To enhance publicity for the new arrangements and ensure that the elderly, who have attended previous rice distribution events, are aware of the reduction in the weight of the rice bags to be distributed in future, the Government will be ready to launch a series of community education programmes starting early next year. These programmes will aim at conveying key messages that queuing up for long hours would pose health hazards to the elderly.

13. We also plan to launch territory-wide publicity activities in relation to the new proposed arrangements through the District Councils and Area Committees in January and February next year. In March and April, we will, through appropriate entertainment and educational television and radio programmes, explain the traditional significance of rice distribution events in Yu Lan Festival, while pointing out the inadequacies in the existing rice distribution arrangement and appealing to the elderly to pay particular attention to their health and safety. To drive home the message in a succinct manner, we also plan to put up publicity posters in April and May next year, to ensure that the elderly and the relatives caring for them realize that queuing up for long hours for “blessed rice” during Yu Lan Festival would pose serious health hazards to the elderly.

14. We will also, through the programmes tailor-made for the elderly produced by radio and television stations, introduce to the elderly the new arrangements for rice distribution during Yu Lan Festival starting in May and June next year. On the other hand, we have also secured the support of the social services organizations to help extensively promote our new rice distribution arrangements through their periodicals and network of elderly services units, and appeal to the elderly to pay attention to their health and personal safety while queuing up for the “blessed rice”.

15. Meanwhile, the Home Affairs Department will meet with Yu Lan organizers again in mid 2006, together with the relevant Government departments (including the Police, Social Welfare Department, Housing Department, LCSD, Lands Department, and Food and Environmental Hygiene Department), to ensure that the organizers comply with the guidelines in distributing the rice bags during the Yu Lan Festival in the coming year.

Way Forward

16 Subject to Members’ agreement with the proposals above, we will discuss in greater detail with the Yu Lan organizations and the social service sector the implementation of these proposals with a view to improving the overall arrangements for rice distribution events in the coming years.

*Home Affairs Department
December 2005*

**Yu Lan Festival
Rice Distribution Events
Held in August - September 2005**

Region	No. of rice distribution events	Venues under Leisure and Cultural Services Department	Venues under Housing Department	Venues under Lands Department	Private venues
Hong Kong Island	10	6	1	1	2
Kowloon	35	20	9	1	5
New Territories	9	4	1	1	3
Total	54	30 (56%)	11 (20%)	3 (5%)	10 (19%)

**Proposed Conditions to be
imposed on the Yu Lan Organizations
for the Rice Distribution Events in 2006**

1. the weight of each rice packet to be distributed at the venue should not exceed 1 kg;
2. cash (e.g. in the form of “lai see”) or other gifts should not be distributed at the venue;
3. organizers should provide adequate insurance cover for third party liability (the amount of insurance cover to be between \$10 million and \$30 million depending on the scale of the event);
4. organizers to provide seats and full shelter at the venue;
5. organizers to consider employing security guards to assist in crowd control at the venue;
6. organizers to provide volunteer helpers (e.g. one for every 50 rice packets); and
7. organizers to provide first aid service and logistical support (such as marquees and mobile toilets).