

Government responds to Coroner's hearing on Fa Yuen Street fire

The Government expressed once again its deepest condolences for those who died in the No. 4 alarm fire in the Fa Yuen Street hawker area on November 30, 2011, at the conclusion of the death inquest today (March 18).

On recommendations made by the Coroner, a Government spokesman said the Administration would study thoroughly the suggestions to see if further improvements could be made in the various aspects.

He said that after the fire various departments had introduced a number of measures to improve the management of fixed-pitch hawker areas, to improve fire prevention in these areas and to provide relief and assistance to the victims.

The Government provided emergency relief and appropriate assistance to the victims immediately after the fire outbreak. The Yau Tsim Mong District Office (YTMDO) activated the emergency relief service instantly to render assistance to the affected residents, and provided them with immediate financial subsidies through the General Chinese Charities Fund. The YTMDO also arranged for the affected residents to move into temporary accommodation in Shek Lei, and furnished the units with daily necessities and household appliances. Social workers and volunteers were also engaged to help the affected residents to settle in Shek Lei and get familiar with the new neighbourhood, the spokesman said.

After the incident, the Home Affairs Department (HAD) solicited community donations of \$2.7 million for the emergency repair works for the common areas of the three seriously affected buildings, including restoration of the main power supply, refurbishment of the external walls, and installation of fire-resistant doors and security gates. The works were completed within a very short period of time so as to allow the affected residents to return home as soon as possible.

The Social Welfare Department (SWD) also worked with relevant departments and non-governmental organisations to follow up on the needs of the victims, providing emergency financial relief and in-kind assistance to them, as well as emotional support, counselling services and long-term housing arrangements.

After the fire, 68 victim families moved temporarily to the temporary accommodation in Shek Lei. Among them, 52 families have been allocated public rental housing units.

In addition, the Buildings Department (BD) conducted detailed investigation at 192–194 Fa Yuen

Street immediately after the fire to assess the damage to the building and identify the necessary follow-up measures. As a result, the BD issued a total of 19 removal orders against unauthorised building works (UBWs) to the owners concerned on December 20, 2011, requiring them to rectify the fire safety irregularities identified during the investigation. So far 12 orders have been complied with or have had the relevant irregularities rectified. The BD has instigated prosecutions in respect of five orders against the owners for failure to comply with the orders, while for the remaining two orders issued against the co-owners in respect of the irregularities in the common parts of the building, the remedial works are now under way.

Improving the management of fixed-pitched hawker areas

The spokesman pointed out that the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) has strengthened its work on the management of the 43 hawker areas. This has included requiring stall hawkers to comply with the stall area requirements during and outside business hours, and enforcement actions against stall canopies constructed of combustible materials and the overnight storage of commodities outside the approved stall areas, in order to reduce fire risks. Since November 1, 2012, the FEHD has also implemented the mechanism for suspension or cancellation of hawker licences against repeat offenders.

Meanwhile, a Steering Committee, chaired by the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene, was set up to formulate and oversee the implementation of specific measures to reduce fire risks in each hawker area. Hawker Management Consultative Committees covering all hawker areas have also been set up.

To further improve and enhance the fire safety standard and power installation of hawker stalls, as well as to help improve the functionality of hawker stalls and the operating environment of hawker areas, the FEHD will launch a five-year assistance scheme, covering about 4 300 on-street hawkers in the 43 fixed-pitched hawker areas. Under the scheme, a one-off grant will be given to hawkers who reconstruct their stalls in-situ or are required to move their stalls to new pitch spaces for fire safety reasons. An ex-gratia payment will also be offered for voluntary surrender of hawker licences. The Government has made available funding of \$230 million for the project. With the approval of the Finance Committee last Friday (March 15), the assistance scheme will be launched by this summer.

Enhancing fire prevention and building safety

After the fire, various departments put in place a series of measures to enhance fire and building safety in hawker stalls and their adjoining buildings, specifically targeting the UBWs associated with subdivided flats. Taking into account the fire risk that might be brought about by on-street hawker

stalls to adjoining buildings, the BD adjusted the strategy by selecting those old-style domestic or composite buildings situated in the vicinity of on-street hawker stall areas, and which were of the same type as the ones in Fa Yuen Street affected by the fire, as the 339 target buildings for the large-scale operation in 2012.

The BD issued a total of 1 079 removal orders in respect of the irregularities identified after the inspection to require the owners to rectify the irregularities. Meanwhile, a dedicated task force of the Fire Services Department (FSD) also conducted inspections of these buildings and took enforcement actions against fire hazards or other fire safety-related irregularities which included issuing 251 Fire Hazard Abatement Notices and instituting one prosecution.

In addition, as the common parts of old-style domestic and composite buildings, especially the common escape staircases, are more prone to have the problems of poor management and maintenance, causing irregularities in the fire-resisting construction and means of escape and thereby adversely affecting the fire safety of the buildings, the BD and the FSD will launch a large-scale joint operation.

The operation will aim to enhance the fire safety of the common means of escape in old-style domestic and composite buildings. The BD and the FSD will deploy staff to jointly inspect the common means of escape of about 6 500 such old-style domestic and composite buildings and the inspection is expected to be completed within one year. The two departments will then follow up with appropriate enforcement action against the fire safety irregularities. During this operation, the BD and FSD will also distribute publicity leaflets to enhance the awareness of fire safety among residents in such old-style buildings.

Furthermore, the FSD has already reviewed and revised contingency plans for areas where old residential and composite buildings are situated in the vicinity of closely packed hawker stalls, so as to enhance the efficiency of fire-fighting and rescue operations in case of a fire. The FSD will also deploy fire-fighting personnel and fire appliances to conduct inspections and run road tests from time to time in these areas, in order to be kept abreast of the latest developments of different areas and ensure the smooth passage of emergency vehicles.

The Electrical and Mechanical Services Department (EMSD) has also worked with other government departments and concerned parties to step up inspections at the hawker stalls in Hong Kong and will initiate necessary legal and improvement actions should any contravention of the Electricity Ordinance be found.

Supporting residents in old buildings and strengthening building management

The HAD has also significantly enhanced support in regard to old buildings. It has rolled out the Building Management Professional Advisory Service Scheme, under which professional property management companies are commissioned to provide tailor-made and one-stop professional advisory services and support to 1 200 so-called "three-nil" buildings. These services include preparing management audit reports for the common areas and equipment (including fire services installations and fire escapes), assisting the owners in forming owners' corporations (OCs) and applying for various subsidies or loan schemes, following up on the maintenance works and matters relating to tenders.

Noting that old buildings involve great difficulties in forming OCs and managing as the majority of owners are not living in the buildings concerned, the HAD has launched the Resident Liaison Ambassador (RLA) Scheme and successfully recruited a total of 800 residents from some 440 "three-nil" buildings to serve as RLAs. The RLAs will communicate with other residents living in the same building on matters relating to daily building management, security, fire safety and so on. Not only can RLAs help improve the management of these buildings effectively, but they can also refer the safety hazards of the buildings to relevant government departments quickly for immediate follow-up actions.

To enhance the awareness of fire safety among residents in old buildings, the HAD has collaborated with the FSD and the BD, District Councils and Direct Fire Safety Committees to organise and roll out a series of public education and publicity programmes. Targeted inspections and promotion have been conducted in areas with a higher concentration of "three-nil buildings" and subdivided units. The HAD, the FSD and the BD have also set up a notification mechanism for exchanging and sharing information on high-risk old buildings with a view to facilitating better co-ordination in conducting visits and inspections, as well as in planning for education and publicity on fire prevention.

In addition, the HAD has implemented the Subsidy for Owners' Corporations of Old Buildings programme, funded by the Community Care Fund (CCF), to provide eligible owners of old buildings with a maximum subsidy of \$20,000 for three years. The OCs can make use of the subsidy to clear fire escapes and conduct regular inspections of fire services and electrical and mechanical equipment. So far, more than 2 400 OCs have indicated that they would apply.

Long Term Housing Strategy Review

The spokesman said the Government is now conducting the Long Term Housing Strategy (LTHS) Review. The review will examine the housing needs of various groups in the community, set priorities and formulate a new LTHS. To better understand the problems of subdivided units, the LTHS Steering Committee has commissioned an independent research institution to assess the profile and living conditions of tenants living in subdivided units, and to estimate the number of subdivided flats and

households living in those flats in the territory. This will enable the Steering Committee to get a better picture of the size of the problem. The findings will be available around mid-2013.

Enhancing support to inadequately housed low-income families

The spokesman said the Government is very concerned about housing needs and the plight of low-income families that are inadequately housed. The CCF has launched a programme to provide a one-off subsidy for low-income persons who are inadequately housed. As at March 8, the CCF had received 20 504 applications, and had disbursed subsidies of around \$97.74 million to 16 498 households (38 711 persons). The deadline for application is April 8.

In addition, with the proposed injection of an additional \$15 billion into the CCF in the 2013-14 Budget, the CCF is expediting the review of the programme, so that the eligibility criteria can be refined for relaunching the programme to assist more families living in subdivided units.

The spokesman stressed that the Government will continue to enhance fire and building safety through high-level co-ordination, strengthening inspections and enforcement actions, public education and support to residents living in old buildings.

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