

LCQ16: Illegal practices used by taxi drivers to deceive travellers

Following is a question by the Hon Paul Tse and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Ms Eva Cheng, at the Legislative Council meeting today (February 3):

Question:

It has been reported that the situation of taxi drivers deceiving travellers by various illegal practices (including deceptively claiming that fares are in US dollars, activating the meters before picking up passengers as well as overcharging luggage fees and tunnel fees, etc.) is not uncommon in recent years. There was even an incident which occurred in December last year of a taxi driver allegedly detaining a few travellers after an argument with them over overcharging, which seriously undermines the reputation of Hong Kong's tourism industry. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) of the number of complaints received by the authorities about taxi drivers allegedly deceiving travellers by various illegal practices in each of the past three years; of the usual procedure for handling such complaints by the authorities upon receipt of the complaints, as well as the time usually needed for handling the complaints; where the investigation work of the complaints concerned can only be completed after the travellers have departed from Hong Kong, whether the authorities will inform such travellers of the investigation result;

(b) given that quite a number of travellers only make short stays in Hong Kong, whether the authorities have set up an express mechanism for handling travellers' complaints, so as to properly handle complaints similar to the aforesaid situations; if they have, of the details; if not, whether they will do so as soon as possible; and

(c) whether it will increase the penalty on taxi drivers who used the aforesaid illegal practices to deceive travellers, and enhance inspection and prosecution work, so as to create deterrent effect; if it will, of the specific details?

Reply:

President,

Based on the present procedure, if a tourist makes a report or lodges a complaint of being deceived by taxi drivers to the Police, the complainant will be asked to provide detailed information of the complaint in order that the Police can initiate an investigation. The investigation will be conducted as quickly as possible.

In case the investigation cannot be completed before the departure of the tourist, the Police will request him/her to leave the contact so that the Police can inform him of the progress and information results of the investigation. If necessary, the tourist may be requested to return to Hong Kong, at Hong Kong Government's expense, to give evidence at any subsequent court cases.

Besides, the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) operates a multi-lingual Visitor Hotline for handling visitors' travel-related enquiries in Hong Kong, with a view to resolving the enquires before their departure. In the case of taxi-related complaints, the HKTB will immediately refer these cases to the Transport Department (TD) or the Police for follow-up and assistance.

To facilitate travellers understand the local taxi fare arrangements, the HKTB has uploaded onto its website the general information about hiring taxis. The TD has also produced flyers providing the scale of fares for hiring of taxis in Hong Kong and the fares to and from popular tourist areas. The flyers are distributed to visitors for their reference at major cross boundary control points and tourist attractions, such as the Airport, Lok Ma Chau Control Point and the Hong Kong Disneyland, as well as visitor centres of the HKTB. The TD also provides taxi fare information through information plates and LED display panels installed at major taxi stands. The information provided in the flyers and at the facilities includes hotline numbers of the TD, the Police, the HKTB and Transport Complaints Unit (TCU) to facilitate visitors to seek assistance as and when necessary.

As regards the number of complaints lodged by tourists about having been deceived by taxi drivers through various illegal practices over the past three years, the HKTB received 18 cases in 2007, 20 cases in 2008 and 28 cases in 2009. For the number of complaints lodged by tourists against overcharging of taxi fares by taxi drivers, the TCU received 276 cases in 2007, 381 cases in 2008 and 433 cases in 2009.

The Police and TD do not maintain separate statistics of the cases by "tourists" and "non-tourists". Over the past three years, the total numbers of complaints received by the Police about overcharging of taxi fares by taxi drivers (including tourists and non-tourists), were 337 in 2007, 391 in 2008 and 422 in 2009. The corresponding numbers of complaints received by TD were 93 cases in 2007, 123 cases in 2008 and 187 cases in 2009. As a complainant can lodge the same complaint through various channels, there might be overlaps with the above figures.

In accordance with the law, a taxi driver shall not overcharge passengers otherwise he would commit an offence and is liable on conviction to a maximum penalty of a fine of \$10,000 and an imprisonment for six months. If passengers find out that they have been overcharged by taxi drivers, they can keep the fare receipts and report to the Police. The Police will continue to take enforcement actions in accordance with the current legislations and enforcement policy.

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