

Cops grilled over rail siege rumpus

Security chiefs stood their ground in the face of intense questioning from lawmakers over their use of force during an anti-Express Rail Link protest outside the Legislative Council last month.

At a meeting of the Legislative Council security panel yesterday, the Security Bureau and police defended law enforcers' actions on the night of January 16, when the Finance Committee passed the almost HK\$67 billion funding for the controversial rail project.

Lawmaker Cyd Ho Sau-lan raised concern over the use of pepper spray, questioning why some officers still sprayed demonstrators when they had already dispersed.

Assistant Commissioner of Police Austin Kerrigan admitted 13 officers had used pepper spray on three different occasions during the scuffles but did not answer directly when asked whether police had given ample warning.

``Warnings are required to be given where practicable. Obviously, if someone is jumping on you and assaulting you, there is no time to give a warning. You just have to react,'' he said.

Kerrigan said seven police officers had sustained injuries. One suffered a fractured finger. He was taken to hospital and given 10 days' sick leave.

Another officer was hit in the eye by a bottle and required hospital care, he added.

``Freedom of assembly, association is not a license to assault police. That's where we draw the line. We will not tolerate that,'' he said.

Legislator Cheung Man-kwong blamed the police for instigating chaos by putting up barricades near the Bank of China headquarters, which blocked the way of the protesters as they marched around Legco.

He said the move angered the demonstrators, leading to the scuffles.

But Undersecretary for Security Lai Tung-kwok said police superintendents decided the tactics and deployment depending on the situations.

Lawmaker Emily Lau Wai-hing asked if the police were capable of protecting legislators' right to get in and out of the Legco building in the case of similar protests in future.

Lai said police had advised lawmakers not to leave when protesters besieged the premises as it was very chaotic outside.

Lai also expressed doubts on the claim of a netizen that the plastic bottle that hit legislator Philip Wong Yu-hong in the head was hurled by a plain-clothes police officer.

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HK's young demand to be heard

HONG KONGERS protesting over a high-speed rail line, with its clear economic and social value, goes against the nature of an avowedly pragmatic people. Yes, costs have gone through the roof, at HK\$67 billion (S\$12 billion). But is it not better to settle on a formula and proceed with the work than to be left in the cold when China's mainland high-speed rail network linking the main cities is completed? And yes, a village would have to make way for the Hong Kong line. But since when have Hong Kongers lost sleep over the sacrifice of a village to development? Yet, here they were, taking to the streets three times within a month to try and block the budget for the project.

But this is an issue over which Hong Kongers are split fairly evenly, and quite seized by. Polls show 50 per cent are for it and 44 per cent against. It is an expression of dissatisfaction among a people better known for hunkering down to make money. Hong Kongers are unhappy they have not been consulted adequately by a government which they see, rightly or wrongly, as being keener to do Beijing's bidding than to tend to their concerns. They see the government leaning towards business in the rail and other projects, to the detriment of residents in a society where the income gap continues to widen.

It bears watching that many of the protesters were young people - the 'post-80s generation' born in the 1980s. They are more politicised than their elders, having grown up during the politically charged period of transition between the British colonial administration and restoration of Chinese rule. They are also less enamoured of unchecked growth, want more social justice and are prepared to make a stand on environmental issues.

To be sure, their disgruntlement has also to do with their economic situation. Unemployment is highest among this age group at 4.9 per cent, with many jobless university graduates worried about paying off student loans. Those still at university resent competition from mainland Chinese students. The post-80s group proved to be a potent force in the recent protests. Internet-savvy, they use tools such as Facebook and Twitter to mobilise protesters quickly. Young and unafraid, they think nothing of skirmishing with police.

Beijing should take heed of the new phenomenon and listen to the voice of the young. Merely offering economic goodies is no longer enough to keep Hong Kongers contented. They want more equitable distribution of wealth and more say in government, among other things. The question is how much Beijing is willing to concede in order to have a smooth integration of the territory with the mainland.

13 officers used pepper spray on railway protesters, police say

Thirteen police officers used pepper spray during a protest against the high-speed rail link last month and seven were injured, the force told Legco's security panel yesterday.

At a panel meeting to discuss how police handled protesters who besieged the Legislative Council Building on January 15 and 16, the force said officers resorted to pepper spray when protesters rushed metal barricades. One of the officers suffered a broken finger.

Pan-democrats and some members of the public criticised the use of pepper spray on the protesters. But Wong Kwok-kin, of the Federation of Trade Unions, said police tactics to repel the protesters - who he said had planned to storm Legco - were too weak.

Democrat Cheung Man-kwong, referring to a report by Human Rights Monitor, said police had used the wrong tactics and should not have stopped protesters from marching around Legco.

Undersecretary for Security Lai Tung-kwok said police had used minimum force, and would take decisive action in a similar event.

Government-friendly lawmakers used the meeting to say they should not be verbally abused just because they supported the HK\$66.9 billion project. We are legislators. How can we be abused with foul language? said Ip Kwok-him, of the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong. The protesters are really a mob.

Ip was among a dozen government allies trapped inside the building after pan-democrats failed to block funding for the railway that will link Hong Kong and Guangzhou.

Protesters, who oppose the project on the grounds its route and cost are against the public interest, demanded functional constituencies be scrapped because lawmakers representing them backed the project.

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City has much to be proud of

I congratulate Kelly Lam on her letter ("For my family, Disneyland has been a resounding success", January 23).

All too often, our media consults so-called (and largely self-proclaimed) experts on matters concerning Hong Kong's vision to be the best place to live in the world, instead of consulting the real people of Hong Kong.

I'm fed up with these naysayers who talk about such things as Disneyland's economic viability, the so-called airport fiasco regarding the overnight transfer of airport operations from Kai Tak to Chek Lap Kok (which was, in reality, a triumph of hard work and application) and, most recently, the express rail link, among a long list of other issues reported in a similarly negative fashion.

Hong Kong should thank the forward thinkers and visionaries to whom the benefits of such enterprises are self-evident.

It should also thank those who work so hard to deliver these projects - real people with real expertise doing real jobs with tangible benefits.

Sometimes it seems that our media is only interested in talking to those who have never done a day's real work in their lives.

Perhaps this is the easy option. Those with real vision are too busy getting on with the job at hand to talk to the media.

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