

Civil servants reach out to earthquake victims

Civil Service Newsletter Editorial Board

■ THE civil service reacted swiftly to news of the devastating earthquake that hit Sichuan Province on May 12. The quake, measuring 8 on the Richter scale, killed more than 70,000 people and left many thousands more injured and millions homeless.



Vice-President, Xi Jinping (ninth left, first row) meeting with volunteer members of government departments and the Hospital Authority who took part in the search and rescue efforts.

Hong Kong's efforts were recognised by the Vice-President, Xi Jinping on July 8 at the end of his visit to Hong Kong. On behalf of the Central Government and the quake victims, Mr Xi expressed gratitude and admiration during a meeting with 120 volunteer members of government departments who took part in the search and rescue efforts in Sichuan. He praised team members for their devotion, quest for excellence and professionalism, noting that these had earned the respect of the quake victims and the Chinese people. The team members came from the Fire Services Department, the Government Flying Service, the Department of Health, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, the Water Supplies Department and the Information Services Department. A medical team from the Hospital Authority, which treated the quake victims, was also present.

RTHK and FSD-led team first to arrive

Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) reporters, among other Hong Kong media journalists, spared no time in rushing to the scene to cover the disaster. The first batch arrived in Sichuan late on the same day.

Hong Kong's search and rescue team was one of the first to arrive at the scene of the earthquake, leaving for Sichuan in two batches, on May 15 and 16. The team was assigned to carry out search and rescue work at Hanwang in Mianzhu, one of the most devastated areas. The team — working in conjunction with local rescue groups — recovered 24 bodies from the rubble of a collapsed office building and factory plants in the vicinity, and helped the People's Liberation Army rescue a woman survivor trapped under a collapsed building.

The 45-member search and rescue team, led by Senior Divisional Officer of the Fire Services Department, Tam Tai-keung, included 34 Firemen, six Ambulance Officers, two Medical and Health Officers and two Nurses from the Department of Health and an Assistant Information Officer of the Information Services Department.

Mr Tam said, "With our focus on rescuing victims, we had no time to think about anything else." He said that despite the obstacles, such as no water or electricity supply, all the team members did their best to rescue as many survivors as possible.



The search and rescue team removing a body from the rubble.

The team, which took with them about four tonnes of equipment, including life detectors and masonry-cutting machines, moved to Chengdu on May 20 after the task in Hanwang was accomplished. Despite frequent aftershocks, which at one point reached 5.2 on the Richter scale, team members persevered to complete their tasks.

GFS assists from the air

On May 17, a five-man team of the Government Flying Service (GFS), comprising Pilots, Aircrewman Officers and an Aircraft Engineer joined the air relief force at Guanghan airport,

some 50 kilometres north of Chengdu. They worked with the Ministry of Transport rescue crews in various operations, including recovering survivors in mountainous regions, transporting ground search teams to remote sites where casualties were reported missing and transferring supplies to the casualties.

A GFS Super Puma helicopter fully equipped for search and rescue operations flew to Guanghan airport on May 23.

Ardis Tang Sing-tung, Senior Pilot with GFS said the most challenging aspects of the work were:

- high altitude mountain flying — “We are talking about mountains double or triple the height of Tai Mo Shan — at this altitude, aircraft become less responsive, less powerful. Accurate performance calculations and anticipation of control input were key.”
- unfamiliar environment — “Maps were no longer accurate as the shapes of the mountains were damaged by the earthquake; rivers were blocked by the ‘quake lake’. Some valleys between the mountains were so narrow that the normal movement of an aircraft was restricted. Weather in the mountains was fast changing and could be unfriendly.”
- obstacle clearance — “We were mainly tasked with executing rescues at the bottom of the deep valleys, so positioning the aircraft was already difficult due to the steep terrain. In addition, unknown wires and cables were very common, together with the hazards of rubbish blown up by the helicopter downwash.”
- off-base maintenance — “Although our base of operations (Guanghan) was originally a flight training school, it had never been used to handle such a large-scale helicopter operation. Our engineers and technicians provided us with the best maintained machines with limited resources.”

Over the three-week deployment, the GFS team participated in 26 operations through which 96 casualties were brought to safety and 119 people transported to the



A GFS helicopter assisting in a rescue operation.

disaster areas. Most of the 119 were members of ground search teams and specialists who monitored the condition of the quake lake in Tangjiashan.

One of the highlights of the team’s work was the rescue of two injured mine workers who had been trapped in the mountainous area of Mianzhu for over 19 days. Both men were lifted to safety by the GFS helicopter.

Public health experts fly in

Hong Kong’s public health professionals also played an important part in the relief efforts, with a 15-member team flying to Chengdu on May 19. The team, led by Principal Medical and Health Officer, Dr Mok Chiu-yau, comprised three doctors from the Department of Health, 10 Health Inspectors, Foreman and Workman grade officers from the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and two Chemists from the Water Supplies Department (WSD).

The team helped implement infection control measures and environmental disinfection, and offered professional advice on identification of safe water sources for potable and domestic purposes and refuse collection at Yingxiu Town, one of the worst hit areas.



A WSD staff member providing professional advice on water sanitation.

Lee Wah-chu, a Foreman with FEHD, spoke of his experiences as part of the team. "As a Station Sergeant (Auxiliary) for 35 years, I could physically cope with the one-week long environmental disinfection operation. But the risk that the mountains could collapse at any moment was something I had never expected. And I was most impressed by the spirit of our public health team. All of us, regardless of rank, were committed to doing our job — disinfecting the affected areas and preventing the outbreak of disease."

Sense of obligation

Yiu Chi-chung, Workman II, another member of the public health team from FEHD, said that during the operation, it really struck home just how important were the department's regular emergency mock exercises. "Although the scale of the disaster this time was much larger than that of the mock exercises, the experience gained from them did help a great deal," he said.

Immediately after the earthquake, the Home Affairs Department (HAD) put in place a mechanism to channel donations from Hong Kong citizens to the victims of the earthquake. From May 14, 20 Public Enquiry Service Centres of the 18 District Offices and Post Offices began collecting donations from citizens during office hours.

HAD's colleagues in District Offices have assisted local organisations' fund raising activities in the districts. As at July 9, HAD had collected donations amounting to more than \$205 million through its mechanism. A total amount of \$198 million has been passed to five relief organisations.

The Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in Chengdu (CDETO) made every effort to help Hong Kong residents in Sichuan at the time of the earthquake, assisting the injured and their families by providing translation services, facilitating communication and providing them with water and food.

Beyond the call of duty

Officers of CDETO also went to a Sichuan hospital to visit one Hong Kong woman who was badly injured in the earthquake. Poon Yuet-hor, 60, was working as a volunteer at Chengdu Puzhao Temple when the quake struck. Falling debris left her with serious head injuries, a swollen arm and internal injuries. She was found lying in front of the temple minutes after the disaster struck.

After Ms Poon was admitted to hospital in Chengdu, CDETO liaised with local authorities and medical staff in order that she could undergo surgery and receive blood transfusion immediately, given her critical condition. Apart from supporting Ms Poon and her younger sister, CDETO also arranged for Ms Poon's Hong Kong family members to visit Sichuan, and for Ms Poon's subsequent trip back to Hong Kong for further treatment.

CDETO was also instrumental in helping the Immigration Department (ImmD) locate missing Hong Kong residents. Richard Luk Fong-chun, Director of CDETO, said that providing assistance to all Hong Kong people in Sichuan was his responsibility and his office had used every means possible to find those missing. Two Immigration Officers were sent from Beijing to help the office in the support work.

Putting fears aside

Mr Luk said that none of the CDETO staff or their families left Chengdu in the aftermath of the quake, despite the dangers. One officer from Beijing, who had recently married in Hong Kong, even postponed his honeymoon and came direct to Chengdu to help. The staff themselves had a dramatic escape from their 38th floor tower block when the earthquake struck. The employees, including two pregnant women, laid low during the two-to-three-minute quake, then fled down the stairs to an open area. By evening, CDETO was already immersed in emergency co-ordination work. During the next three weeks, CDETO

operated emergency co-ordination out of a temporary accommodation.

ImmD was also busy dealing with requests for help from Hong Kong residents in Sichuan. The department received 126 requests for assistance and 476 enquiries since the earthquake. Among the requests, there were 101 cases in which Hong Kong residents reportedly lost contact with their families, one injury and 24 other cases mainly involving the loss of travel documents or money.

The Social Welfare Department (SWD) announced shortly after the earthquake that its social workers and clinical psychologists were available to provide counselling and other welfare assistance to Hong Kong residents who had been affected by the Sichuan earthquake.



Staff of FEHD undertaking disinfection work in the earthquake affected areas to maintain environmental hygiene.

An SWD officer said the department would do all it could to help those who were emotionally disturbed or grieving. The clinical psychologists of SWD also provided crisis management briefing and other follow-up support service for members of the Hong Kong teams that were sent to Sichuan to help with the rescue as well as newspaper reporters who returned from covering the stories of the earthquake in Sichuan.

SWD and HKP join in relief efforts

SWD was also busy processing applications from organisations wanting to raise funds for the earthquake victims. The department has received a total of 287 applications as at June 10, and had issued 256 public subscription permits to raise funds in public places. Staff of SWD has worked till small hours for the first week after the earthquake to process these applications so that permits could be issued promptly for these organisations to raise funds from the people of Hong Kong to relieve the disaster.

Even agencies that could not offer direct relief aid came up with innovative ways to help the earthquake victims. Hongkong Post (HKP) held a fund raising auction of stamp products and banknotes on May 24 at the General Post Office.

The auction was conducted by Sotheby's Hong Kong, which offered its service on a voluntary basis.

HKP produced a limited-edition of 10 frames of Mainland Scenery Series special stamp sheetlets and other prestige stamp products for the fund raising auction. Most of these products were last stocks from HKP's stamp vault.

A total bid value of \$1 million was received at the auction. With the generous support from the bidders, together with donations of over \$160,000 from HKP staff and \$200,000 from Sotheby's Hong Kong, HKP raised a total of \$1.36 million, which had been donated to the Home Affairs Department for emergency relief operations related to the Sichuan earthquake.

In addition, the giant pandas in Sichuan are not being neglected. HKP also produced Limited Edition Prestige Stamp Products with Giant Panda Paw Print of Ying Ying and Le Le (3,500 sets of Stamp Pack with Giant Panda Paw Print and 10 sets of Box Set with Clay Impression of Giant Panda Paw Print) to raise funds to support the rebuilding of panda facilities in Sichuan.

A total of \$1.375 million was raised through the sale of the prestige products. All the proceeds have been donated to the Sichuan Earthquake Relief Giant Panda Base Rebuilding Fund set up by the Ocean Park Conservation Foundation of Hong Kong.

In response to the Secretary for the Civil Services's appeal to all civil servants for donations to help the victims of the earthquake, many bureaux and departments launched donation drives to make donations to various relief organisations.

Hong Kong unified in show of respect

On May 19 at 2.28pm, civil servants joined with many of Hong Kong's citizens in observing three minutes' silence as a mark of respect for the victims of the earthquake. It was exactly a week since the devastating quake had hit Sichuan.

Even children joined in after the Secretary for Education issued a letter to all schools, kindergartens and child-care centres in Hong Kong appealing to staff and students to observe the three minutes' silence. All schools that hoist the national flag flew it at half-mast from May 19 to 21.

The radio channels of RTHK relayed the mourning service of the China National Radio at 2.28pm.

To consolidate and sustain efforts to help rebuild Sichuan, RTHK also teamed up with Agency For Volunteer Service to launch a Sichuan Rebuild Volunteer Programme from June 2 to provide a platform for contributors in Hong Kong to commit 100 hours of volunteer service in the coming five years for the after care of the devastated areas. In less than one month, over 4,500 individuals and 30 organisations have enrolled in the programme.



Civil servants observing a three-minute silence at the Central Government Offices on May 19 to pay tribute to the victims of the earthquake in Sichuan.