

## **Airport Authority's measures taken to safeguard passengers' safety Investigation Report**

On 14 August 2019, this Office received two complaints against the Airport Authority (“AA”).

### **The Complaint**

2. According to the complainants, on the night of 13 August 2019, a large-scale public assembly was staged at the Hong Kong International Airport (“HKIA”), during which two Mainland passengers were assaulted and detained respectively at HKIA (hereafter referred to as “Incident I” and “Incident II” respectively). The complainants called the Hong Kong Police Force (“HKPF”) regarding the incidents. HKPF replied that AA refused to have police officers deployed to the scene to offer assistance on the grounds that AA could handle on its own. Eventually, police officers arrived on-site, and the two injured passengers were conveyed to hospital for treatment.

3. The complainants criticised AA for failing to adopt proper measures for ensuring the safety of passengers.

### **Our Findings**

4. After assessment, this Office decided to initiate a full investigation into the two cases. On 10 January 2020, our officers conducted a site inspection at HKIA and met with AA representatives to dig into the case details.

### ***AA’s Duties and Functions***

5. AA, a statutory body wholly owned by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, is responsible for the operation and development of HKIA.

### ***Airport Emergency Centre***

6. The Airport Emergency Centre (“AEC”) is staffed by representatives from AA, HKPF, the Civil Aviation Department, the Immigration Department, the Customs and Excise Department, the Aviation Security Company Limited (“AVSECO”) and airline

companies. It is responsible for monitoring the situation of public assembly activities and making timely decisions to adopt corresponding measures.

### ***Major Events***

#### 6 August 2019

7. From social media, AA learned that some netizens called for a public assembly event entitled “Ten thousand meeters and greeters” (“the Event”) commencing 1 pm every day for three consecutive days between 9 and 11 August at the Arrivals Hall of HKIA Terminal 1.

#### 9 August 2019

8. Starting from 6 am, AA designated a control area with mills barriers at the aisles of the check-in counters in the Departures Hall of Terminal 1. Only holders of a valid air ticket or boarding pass for a flight in the next 24 hours and a valid passport were allowed to enter the control area to go through the boarding procedures (“the Access Control”).

9. At 10 am, AEC was fully activated by AA.

#### 13 August 2019

10. At around 3 pm, more than 3,000 participants assembled at HKIA for the Event.

11. At 6:25 pm, AEC was notified by an AA staff member on duty in the Terminal Buildings that assembly participants within the transition area in Terminal 1 accused two persons of being Mainland public security agents. While one person managed to leave, the other person (“Mr X”) was besieged by the assembly participants and could not leave (i.e. Incident I). AA staff remained on-site to offer assistance.

12. Around 6:30 pm, airport security officers arrived at the scene and attempted, jointly with the AA staff, to assist Mr X to leave, but they were all besieged by the assembly participants. AA immediately made a report to HKPF. The HKPF representatives stationed at AEC were informed of the situation simultaneously.

13. At 7:57 pm, ambulancemen arrived at the Terminal Buildings and were escorted

to the scene by AA staff. Subsequently, the AA staff and airport security officers who remained on-site all along made several attempts to assist the ambulancemen and Mr X to leave, but they were obstructed by the assembly participants.

14. At 8:55 pm, assisted by AA staff and airport security officers, Mr X and the ambulancemen left the transition area in Terminal 1. Upon reaching a location in front of Check-in Aisle C in the Departures Hall, they were again stopped from leaving by a group of radical assembly participants. In the interim, AA kept in close contact with HKPF, while HKPF continued to monitor the progress of situation and conduct risk assessment.

15. At 10:07 pm, as the ambulancemen and Mr X were still unable to leave due to the obstruction of assembly participants, AA repeatedly broadcast announcements to appeal for the assembly participants' giving way, but was in vain. The AA and AVSECO representatives stationed at AEC continued to monitor the situation jointly with the HKPF representatives, and were prepared to collaborate on HKPF's action.

16. At 10:45 pm, police officers entered Terminal 1 via the downramp connecting to Zone 2 on the 8th Floor. At that juncture, those assembly participants besieging Mr X were leaving the scene, while some of them moved to the entry point on the 8th Floor of Terminal 1 with the intent to block the entry passageway, leading to a clash with police officers. AA staff and airport security officers seized the opportunity to successfully escort the ambulancemen and Mr X to leave Terminal 1 and board an awaiting ambulance outside the terminal.

17. At 11:03 pm, Mr X left the HKIA Terminal Buildings on the ambulance.

18. At 11:45 pm, AA staff noticed from CCTV footage that a large group of assembly participants gathered at Check-in Aisle G in the Departures Hall of Terminal 1. Shortly afterwards, some of the CCTV cameras in the vicinity were blocked.

#### In the small hours of 14 August 2019

19. At 12:04 am, AA was notified by the Fire Services Communications Centre that someone had called 999, requesting the assistance of ambulancemen for a passenger ("Mr Y") who had sustained hand injuries during a clash with the assembly participants at Check-in Aisle G of Terminal 1 (i.e. Incident II). AA and AVSECO immediately deployed staff to the scene, but they were obstructed by the assembly participants and

could not get near Mr Y.

20. At 12:15 am, AA staff successfully escorted the ambulancemen to the location at Check-in Aisle G. The assembly participants allowed the ambulancemen to enter the besieged area to check on Mr Y, but they stopped the ambulancemen from leaving with Mr Y. About 10 minutes later, the assembly participants allowed the ambulancemen to convey Mr Y from the scene to an awaiting ambulance outside the terminal. Throughout the incident, AA staff remained on-site and attempted to offer assistance.

21. At 12:27 am, Mr Y left on the ambulance.

### *AA's Explanation*

22. AA gave the following explanation.

23. AA became aware of the Event on the morning of 6 August 2019 (see **para. 7**). Subsequently, in addition to conducting internal discussion and devising corresponding measures, AA held a number of meetings with HKPF and other Government departments to explore contingency measures. Moreover, AA kept HKIA stakeholders and business partners (including airline companies) abreast of the latest situation and advised them to adopt corresponding measures in tandem, so as to maintain airport operations during the Event as far as practicable.

24. AEC was fully activated at 10 am on 9 August. During the operation of AEC, HKPF took part in the entire process and conducted risk assessment on the acts of the Event's participants. Meanwhile, AA and AVSECO were constantly ready to collaborate on HKPF's action.

25. On the night of 13 August, AA staff and airport security officers continued to handle Incident I and Incident II according to established procedures, including using their best efforts to assist Mr X and Mr Y on-site. Yet, they were obstructed by radical assembly participants from assisting Mr X and Mr Y in leaving immediately. Nevertheless, AA kept in close contact and cooperated with HKPF throughout the incidents on the latter's action.

26. Under the influence of socio-political movement, the number of participants for the Event far exceeded the number of people assembling at HKIA on any past occasions

(with more than 9,000 participants at the peak). The acts of many participants for the Event were highly radical. Their confrontational acts posed significant risks to passengers and the staff performing duties on-site.

27. AA issued a statement on 18 August to clarify as follows:

- Airport security officers had not obstructed HKPF officers from attending the scene to handle the disputes on 13 August.
- On 13 August, AA staff and airport security officers stayed dutifully at their positions, handled the incidents and assisted the relevant passengers with their best efforts, and continued to cooperate with HKPF in taking enforcement action.

### *Response from HKPF*

28. In response to our enquiry, HKPF replied that AA had not refused to have police officers deployed to the scene to assist in conveying the injured passengers to hospital.

### **Our Comments**

29. Our investigation focuses on whether AA had used best efforts in discharging its duties. The decisions and actions of other departments, organisations and entities are not within the ambit of this investigation. Ahead of the Event, AA implemented the Access Control as early as 6 am on 9 August 2019 at the aisles of the check-in counters in the Departures Hall of Terminal 1 to facilitate the smooth immigration procedures of outbound passengers. Moreover, AA fully activated AEC at 10 am on the same day, such that the representatives of relevant companies and Government departments (including HKPF) could jointly monitor the situation of the public assembly activities and make timely decisions to adopt corresponding measures (see **paras. 7–9**).

30. According to AA, AEC had monitored the Event all along. Therefore, the HKPF representatives stationed at AEC should have kept track of Incident I and Incident II and assessed the situation in order to identify the suitable opportunity for taking action.

31. Incident I started at 6:25 pm (see **para. 11**) and ended at around 11 pm (see

**para. 17)** on 13 August 2019. Incident II started in the small hours of the following day (see **para. 19**) and ended at around 12:27 am (see **para. 21**). Throughout the incidents, AA staff and airport security officers remained on-site to assist Mr X and Mr Y, and attempted to help them leave, although to no avail.

32. HKPF confirmed to this Office that AA had not refused to have police officers deployed to the scene to assist in conveying the injured passengers to hospital.

33. We consider that AA was not in a position to prevent or stop the occurrence of Incident I and Incident II. Moreover, not being law enforcement officers, AA staff and airport security officers did not have the powers or suitable equipment to disperse or arrest the assembly participants who obstructed Mr X and Mr Y from leaving, thereby allowing Mr X and Mr Y to leave as early as possible.

34. After scrutinising the sequence of events, we accept that AA had indeed adopted proactive measures in response to the Event. It had tried to maintain airport operations and ensure passenger safety as far as practicable, including endeavouring to assist in the exit of Mr X and Mr Y, who were besieged by the assembly participants.

35. Based on the above analysis, The Ombudsman considers the complaint **unsubstantiated**.

**Office of The Ombudsman**  
**April 2020**