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Speech by the Hon Mrs Selina Chow Liang Shuk-Yee, GBS, JP
Motion Debate on Boundary Crossing Arrangements for Mainlanders visiting Hong Kong Individually, 15 October 2003

Selina Chow:

Madam President, first of all, I would like to declare an interest as I am also Chairman of the Hong Kong Tourism Board.

To establish a hospitality image for Hong Kong, a wide range of complementary measures are warranted. After all, tourism is every citizen's business. Whether a place can bring back tourists again and again definitely depends on the ability of the entire community to make tourists feel that they are most welcome. Actually, we are obliged to provide tourists with the best services once they step upon our immigration control points. To start with, Hong Kong must leave them a good impression by giving them a hazzle-free and enjoyable immigration experience, and then impress them with Hong Kong's hospitality and sincerity.

In recent years, the rapid growth of the market geared to mainland tourists has certainly provided infinite momentum to Hong Kong's tourism. Mainland tourists have come to Hong Kong mainly on land. According to preliminary figures from January to September this year, over 1.36 million passenger trips by tourists were recorded for the territory, with 5.6 million passenger trips, or 54%, being made by mainland tourists — I wanted to say 10.36 million passenger trips, of which 5.6 million were by mainland compatriots. 75% of mainland tourists have arrived on land, 13% by sea, and 12% by air. These figures can already reflect the situation after the relaxation of individual travel by mainlanders from eight cities in Guangdong Province, Beijing and Shanghai.

Besides, there were tourists from other parts of the world who travelled to Hong Kong via China. Last year, the number of such tourists reached 3.5 million, most of them entering Hong Kong on land or by sea. These figures have demonstrated the importance of land and sea control points, and also the pressure they face in receiving tourists.

It is worth noting that, with the relaxation of restrictions on individual travel, mainland tourists might no longer opt for a long stay. Instead, they might adopt a so-called "flash" pattern of travel by coming and leaving on the same day or any time during weekends. With the flow of

passengers crossing the boundary to go to school, to work, or for business purposes, coupled with increasing contact between the two places, the number of short-stay mainland travellers is expected to rise steadily. Furthermore, they are not going to visit Hong Kong only during golden weeks such as National Day, Labour Day or during long holidays. As such, it is extremely important for clearance arrangements, both on weekdays and during weekends, to tie in tune with the flow of passengers through strengthening supporting facilities in terms of manpower, clearance counters, transportation, and so on.

The daily flow of passengers at Lo Wu is around 260000 passenger trips, and 80000 at Lok Ma Chau, though the two control points may handle 350000 and 90000 passenger trips respectively during peak periods upon making special arrangements. Yet it is impossible for us to predict the date or time individual travellers may visit the territory. Moreover, they cannot present for immigration clearance collectively as they will be coming as individual travellers, not in tour groups. Therefore, it will take them a longer time to cross the boundary. Confusion might arise if control points fail to cope when there is a sudden surge in the number of cross-boundary passengers. As such, the Government must not wait until demand exceeds supply before considering constructing additional cross-boundary facilities. Otherwise, the desire of travellers to visit the territory will be dampened because of the hardship they experience in crossing the boundary. The authorities should take prompt actions in providing effective cross-boundary facilities and expediting the progress of infrastructural projects at various control points, with a view to upgrading the handling capacity.

A special inter-departmental unit was specially set up during the golden week for the handling of cross-boundary travellers. It was evident that the flow of cross-boundary passengers had been much smoother than last year. However, it must be pointed out that this deliberate arrangement is a very special one. When the usual arrangements are restored, what can be done to cope with the flow of travellers on weekdays and during weekends? In our opinion, interim cross-boundary measures should be further improved.

Faced with a rapid growth in mainland travellers, coupled with the planned full-scale relaxation of restrictions on individual travel in Guangdong Province in May next year, it can be anticipated that various immigration control points are going to face increasing pressure from the flow of passengers. Following the improvement of facilities at Lo Wu, the Government should take prompt actions in planning infrastructural improvement projects for other control points, so as to strengthen cross-boundary supporting facilities and make flexible arrangements for handling cross-boundary travellers. During peak periods, sufficient manpower has to be deployed to provide as much convenience to cross-boundary travellers as possible, so as to leave them with a pleasing experience.

I understand that whenever we call upon the authorities to cope with the flow of passengers, the relevant Bureau Directors and heads of departments will very often tell us that there are a shortage of manpower and a need for resources. We do understand that, faced with a fiscal deficit, there is certainly pressure in all areas to save resources. However, it must be borne in mind that tourism is after all a kind of business. If tourists can bring benefit to all sorts of businesses, not only tourism, but also other related businesses, including retail and catering, the economy as a whole will enjoy substantial growth. Such being the case, I consider it necessary for the Government to consider investing in this area to ensure that services are provided in a very smooth manner during golden weeks as well as on ordinary days.

With these remarks, Madam President, I support the motion.