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Holiday-makers bombard CCB \$10m missing as firm closes

By JIMMY LEUNG and JULINA CHAN

Holiday plans for about 2,500 people over the Lunar New Year holiday were in ruins yesterday after the sudden closure of Peninsula Tours Enterprises.

The head of the Commercial Crime Bureau, Chief Superintendent Mike Farnham, said the total amount of cash involved could be more than \$10 million.

Chances for many of the clients getting compensation under new legislation offering protection against unscrupulous travel agents are slim — because it only covers holidays booked after February 1.

Police are trying to contact Peninsula Tour's managing director, Mr Stephen Orh, whose whereabouts are not known and about 30 CCB officers are working on the case.

So far police have received 1,665 complaints involving

\$10.11 million.

Hundreds of disappointed holiday-makers looking forward to a break from Hongkong ended up queuing outside the Commercial Crime Bureau yesterday.

They were giving police details of their monetary losses and trying to provide clues for an investigation into the sudden closure of Peninsula Tours.

One of the hardest hit was the manager of a Tsimshatsui nightclub who arranged an eight-day tour to South Korea and Japan leaving today for 33 of his staff as an incentive to work hard.

Mr Eddie Tong said that at the end of last month he paid Peninsula \$193,400 for the trip.

"We have registered with the police but we are keeping our fingers crossed on claiming back the money," he said.

The owner of a Tai Kok Tsui garment factory, Mr Hung Shun-luk, said he had booked a tour to Singapore and Malaysia for next Tuesday for 11 of his staff because they

had a longer holiday during Lunar New Year.

He said he had also paid \$50,000 to the company as early as a month ago in order to secure plane seats during the peak travel season.

Two other holidays arranged by Mr Hung are not affected because he booked through another agent.

A frequent businessman travelling between Hongkong and Japan, Mr Chan Leung-kam, had planned to take his family to Japan for nine days from today.

"The company demanded full payment of \$5,800 each two months before the actual departure date," he told the *SCM Post*.

But Mr Chan added that the travel agent later said there would be no flight to Kyushu today so he changed the itinerary to Honshu instead.

On Tuesday, his family received a call from Peninsula Tours, asking them to assemble at the airport early this morning.

"But when I called today to seek more information I was told the company had closed down," Mr Chan said yesterday.

A Mr Yiu, who was also queuing outside the CCB office yesterday afternoon, said he planned to leave for a nine-day trip to Australia with four other family members on Monday.

"We had arranged our holidays and were looking forward to a happy time," he added.

Mr Yiu said he had paid about \$45,000 for the trip.

He said he checked with the airline office and was now keen to get the air tickets so they could go on their own.

Another couple, Mr and Mrs Law, said they would now have to think of something else to do for Lunar New Year.

Mrs Law said they had

made arrangements last month and were expecting to leave for Japan on Sunday for an eight-day trip.

A Mrs Tse said she immediately went to the CCB office after she had learned the news on television.

"My daughter joined tours by this company before so I never expected it to have financial troubles," she said.

Mrs Tse spent \$16,000 on an 11-day European tour for two people and should be leaving on Sunday.

The tour company had offered bargain tours in Southeast Asia which a rival said yesterday it had also examined — before it found profits would be minimal.

Staff at Peninsula Tours are assisting the CCB in inquiries but no arrests have been made.

The closure of Peninsula Tours, which obtained a licence from the Government at the beginning of this month, was the first case since new legislation controlling travel agents came into effect on February 1.

Newly-appointed Registrar of Travel Agents, Mr N.H. Yeung, said since the Travel Agents Ordinance did not come into effect until February 1, no contracts entered into before then would be covered by the ordinance.

The Advisory Committee on Travel Agents, chaired by the Deputy Secretary for Economic Services, Mr Gerry Higginson, will meet this afternoon to discuss the situation.

Peninsula Tours — which opened 18 years ago — is a member of the Hongkong Association of Travel Agents (HATA).

But a bonding scheme introduced by HATA only covers complaints about quality of service.