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\$4.7m granted for welfare computer link

THE Government obtained approval to use \$4.7 million to enhance a social allowance payment computer system, after legislators were assured that recipients' personal information would not be revealed unnecessarily.

Chief Secretary Sir David Ford also promised that the Government would speed up the drafting of data protection laws to prevent invasion of privacy.

The request for funds had been rejected at a Finance Committee meeting on April 12 on the grounds that records from one department might find their way to other departments to be used against individuals.

Mrs Elsie Tu said yesterday: "We are concerned about a wider aspect of people having access to information, knowing about the movement of our citizens, especially at a time of political danger."

The system, run by the Social Welfare Department

PRIVACY CONCERN

(SWD), would be enhanced to link up with Immigration Department computers to facilitate the detection of recipients' unreported absences from Hongkong.

Under existing rules, recipients of public assistance, old age allowances or disability allowances are disqualified if they are away for periods ranging from 45 days to 90 days, depending on the types of allowance.

SWD officials can check recipients' travel documents, but this practice has become impossible since the Immigration Department launched its easy travel scheme.

Legislators were yesterday assured by officials that only identity card numbers and the period of absence would be transferred from the Immigration Department computers to the SWD.

The Finance Committee also approved \$3.8 billion

for the civil service pay adjustments for both directorate and non-directorate levels, with effect from April 1.

The committee also noted that supplementary provision of about \$110 million should be made available, on application, to discretionary subvented organisations this financial year.

Another \$3.59 million was approved for the second phase of the controversial Expatriate English Language Teachers Scheme in Government and aided secondary schools.

Meanwhile, the Finance Committee approved \$19 million for supporting the Hongkong International Arbitration Centre and an extra \$25.8 million to pay for its rentals.

Financial Secretary Sir Piers Jacobs said it was necessary to support the centre in order to enhance Hongkong's position concerning international trade, even though the centre was operating at a loss of \$500,000 a year.

Ozone Bill passed

LEGISLATION was passed yesterday for Hongkong to fulfil its obligations in helping to save the deteriorating ozone layer through controls on chemicals such as chlorofluorocarbons and halons.

Winding up the resumed debate on the Ozone Layer Protection Bill 1989, Acting Secretary for Lands and Works Kenneth Kwok told legislators that Hongkong might be able to strengthen its role in the future.

But Hongkong should introduce legislation in accordance with the provisions of the Montreal Protocol and amend its strategies whenever the pact was updated.

"I can assure members that we will re-examine the provisions of this bill in about a year's time, or earlier if and when the Montreal

Protocol is updated," he said.

Another nine bills were considered by the Legislative Council, of which two were approved and seven were read a second time.

The Gambling (Amendment) Bill 1989, which proposes to increase the maximum fine for operating illegal gambling enterprises by 10 times to \$5 million, received its second reading.

The legislation also seeks to raise the maximum sentence for people patronising such enterprises to a \$30,000 fine and nine months' imprisonment.

The Secretary for Security, Geoffrey Barnes, told legislators: "Although the main purpose of this bill is to

crack down upon illegal gambling, it will also go a long way to help in the fight against triad and other organised crime syndicates."

He said illegal gambling generated large profits which were believed to be the second major source of income, after drug trafficking, for triad and other organised crime syndicates in Hongkong.

Meanwhile, officials also tabled the White Paper on pollution, whose proposals will cost the Government \$20 billion over the next 10 years.

In tabling the document, Mr Kwok said the expenditure at 1988 prices would be earmarked mostly for major infrastructure projects, including building a new sewerage systems.