

Agencies unite to prevent more tragedies

By Lucia Palpal-fatoc

VARIOUS government agencies involved in the rescue operation during the Pat Sin Range hillfire tragedy yesterday vowed to improve their co-operation and implement the recommendations made by a coroner's court yesterday.

A spokesman for the Fire Services Department (FSD), which led the operation, said all the agencies were willing to co-operate to prevent a recurrence of the tragedy.

Three students and two teachers were killed in the fire.

A breakthrough in improving co-ordination among the agencies was tested during the first joint exercise yesterday of the Inter-departmental Working Party on Countryside Fires and Security led by the FSD.

About 200 staffers from the police Force, the Agriculture and Fisheries Department, Civil Aid Services, Government Flying Service, Auxiliary Medical Services, the Hospital Authority and the FSD took part in the exercise in Shing Mun Country Park.

The exercise simulated an emergency involving several hikers being washed downstream by mountain torrents.

The FSD is also considering reviewing its standing policy of taking injured people to the nearest hospital or clinic.

The Government Flying Service is planning to improve its rescue and communication equipment as the coroner proposed.

Equipment to be purchased includes a "helibasket" to rescue victims, hand-free radios for helicopter winchman, fire

resistant aircrew flying uniforms, a public address system for helicopters and a trunked radio system compatible with the FSD's to be installed in helicopters.

Director of Education Helen Yu Lai Ching-ping said the department was reviewing the guidelines on school outdoor activities to increase input by experts from relevant fields and to strengthen liaison among the departments concerned.

The new set of guidelines are expected to be issued to schools during the 1996-97 school year.

"In addition, we will organise seminars and in-service teacher education programs to enhance understanding and awareness of the necessary safety precautions among teachers and heads of schools," Ms Yu said.

The department is also studying the feasibility of providing mobile phones to schools for outdoor activities.

But initial findings indicated several technical problems, including signal reception in certain locations on land or at sea and the question of effectiveness.

Another area of review is the block insurance scheme, which covers outdoor activities organised by public schools.

The Agriculture and Fisheries Department has allocated \$600,000 this year for its campaign to increase people's awareness about hillfires and hiking safety.

It also has started discussions with Hongkong Telecom on installing about 100 emergency phone lines in country parks.