

Action urged in race to lift threat of legal chaos

By Staff Reporters

HUNDREDS of laws could be repealed, plunging Hongkong's legal system into chaos, if Britain and China fail to reach agreement on overhauling 600 ordinances by 1997.

Attorney-General Jeremy Mathews said yesterday almost 600 pieces of legislation had to be brought into line with the Basic Law before the transfer of sovereignty.

Mathews told the Legislative Council there would be a legal vacuum if Britain and China failed to agree on the

changes. "Were we not able to harmonise our laws with the Basic Law there would be a high risk of those laws being declared by the National People's Congress as being inconsistent with the Basic Law and being repealed," he said.

"Provided we speed up progress in the Joint Liaison Group (JLG) and have constructive dialogue there is no reason why this work should not be completed in time."

The legislation covered a wide area including crown land, nationality, right of

abode, crown proceedings and postage stamps. After 1997 all Hongkong legislation must be localised to be accepted under the Basic Law, the territory's future constitution.

The Hongkong government will prepare adaptations of the ordinances inconsistent with the Basic Law, which must be approved by China.

So far, there has not been an agreement on one adaptation.

Mathews said progress in the JLG talks had to be speeded up to reach agreement before the hand-over of

sovereignty. "The British side has consistently reminded the Chinese side in speeding up progress in these areas. They are of vital importance to the future of Hongkong," he said.

"It is in everybody's interest that these complex and technical subjects be tackled by both sides with a real commitment to be finished by 1997."

He said many of the changes were only technical amendments and would not change the meaning of the laws.

A special unit has been established in the Legal De-

partment to prepare ordinances for localisation.

After identifying ordinances inconsistent with the Basic Law they are redrafted and presented to China during JLG talks for approval.

Governor Chris Patten said in last week's policy address the unit would receive additional funding to speed up the work.

Legislators questioned why the process was started so late.

Mathews said the process was complex and work started as soon as the Basic Law was promulgated in 1990.

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