

# 20,000 rush clinics as disease spreads

## Task force swoops to halt cholera

14-13

By JIMMY LEUNG

THE Hongkong Government set up a special task force yesterday to crack down on illegal food hawkers to halt the spread of cholera.

And as more than 20,000 people rushed to Government health clinics to seek vaccinations against the disease, Government authorities appealed to Hongkong people not to panic.

Six more cases of cholera were confirmed yesterday by Dr S.H. Lee, who is the chairman of the new task force and Deputy Director of Medical and Health. He told a packed press conference that six new cases raised this year's total to 13 — including 11 local and two imported. Another nine suspected cases have yet to be confirmed.

Hongkong was declared a cholera-infected area on Saturday following the confirmation of four cholera cases.

Asked whether an elderly woman found dead in her East Kowloon flat on Sunday was Hongkong's first cholera fatality since 1979, Dr Lee said the cause of her death was still under investigation.

The medical chief also urged those without plans to travel outside Hongkong not to panic and rush in for cholera vaccinations.

However, by 4 pm yesterday, 20,260 people had been given cholera vaccinations in Hongkong — 18,035 at the eight public health centres and 2,225 at the three port health offices.

This was a drastic increase from 1 pm yesterday when 7,831 people were vaccinated — 6,346 people at health centres and 1,485 at the port health offices.

The public health centre hit hardest by the rush was the Shau Kei Wan Jockey Club Clinic where 4,000 people received inoculations by 4 pm.

Dr Lee, however, said the effectiveness of the vaccination was limited and only lasted about four to six months with a 40 and 60 per cent level of protection.

THE Hongkong Tourist Association is watching closely the effects of the cholera outbreak on the local tourist industry.

A spokesman for the HKTA said yesterday that they were not worried about any consequences of the proclamation of Hongkong as a cholera-infected area. Only a few inquiries on the situation had been received in the past few days.

The spokesman said the proclamation of Hongkong as an infected area was just a procedure according to World Health Organisation regulations. Visitors currently staying in Hongkong had little to fear.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for the Peninsula Group of Hotels said there had been no significant changes in bookings since the outbreak.

● Crush at clinics, picture — Page 2.

"It does not give any kind of guarantee of protection. A person who receives a cholera vaccination may develop a false sense of security and, in fact, may be careless in the selection of food and drinks," Dr Lee said.

He added that being vaccinated has its side-effects. "Vaccination can also enable a person to develop what we called a carrier state. In another words, he does not come down with the cholera but carries the organism with him...."

"This is very dangerous

because he does not know about it and then he can spread the disease. That's why we don't advocate mass vaccination.

"The most effective way to prevent cholera is through personal, food and environmental hygiene," Dr Lee said.

He urged the public to wash their hands after going to the lavatory, to carefully select food and drinks and not to buy food sold by illegal hawkers. He said food should be cooked well to kill bacteria.

(Cont'd on Page 2, Col 5)

## Food vans suspect as infection source

By JAMES SUN

HEALTH inspectors who raided two mobile food vans in Kwun Tong yesterday hoped they had located a source of Hongkong's cholera infection.

An owner of the take-away service was also brought to the Kwun Tong police station for inquiries after Urban Services Department (USD) officers inspected a kitchen at Sau Mau Ping which supplied the food to the vans.

The man was released afterwards, pending the result of tests on the food.

The ground-floor kitchen is just a stone's throw from the building where an elderly woman was found dead in her flat on Sunday. It was still not known last night whether the woman died of cholera.

More than 100 kg of food samples, including rice, vegetables and curry meat, were seized in the vans and at the food factory. They were sent for analysis.

The massive raids involving more than 60 officers were made shortly after 1 pm as a result of information provided by two of the confirmed cholera victims.

The elderly factory worker victims, Ms So Ying and Ms Lam Ting, had taken their meal from mobile food vans in the industrial area last week before developing the cholera symptoms.

During the raids yesterday, many factory workers were queuing up at the vans for their meals at two spots in Tsun Yip Street.

Some of them dumped their lunchboxes immediately when they found out the USD inspectors were after

their suppliers. They said they would give up eating from street stalls.

All of the food and cooking apparatus on the vehicles was seized.

After inquiries, USD inspectors conducted a follow-up raid at the kitchen in Hiu Kwong Street where the food was cooked.

Inspectors also collected samples from the scene which they thought might help locate a source of infection.

According to USD's chief health inspector Mr Law Shuk-lai, who was in charge of the special task raids yesterday, it would take at least 48 hours before tests located the source of infection.

Because of the stepped-up measures, two more teams comprising 42 USD officers would be deployed to the area to help the existing seven teams.

The teams would continue their raids today at four blackspots in Kwun Tong where illegal food hawkers are active.

Last month, 37 unlicensed cooked-food hawkers and 29 hawkers selling restricted foods (such as barbecue pork) were arrested by general duties teams in the area.

Meanwhile, according to a department spokesman, surprise raids against illegal cooked-food stalls were conducted yesterday by three other general duties teams in Kwun Tong.

"As a result of the raids, summonses were served to two hawkers who are expected to be charged with hawking without a licence and selling restricted food," he said.

In addition two cooked-food handcarts were seized.

## Task force swoops to halt spread

(Cont'd from Page 1)

Other members of the high-powered co-ordinating committee on cholera control include representatives from the Urban Services Department, the Regional Services Department, the Housing Department, the Government Information Service, the Medical and Health Department and the Secretary for Municipal Services.

After an emergency meeting yesterday morning, it was decided that various measures would be taken to prevent further spreading of the disease.

Dr Lee said inspection of all food premises, particularly those in areas where cholera cases were reported, would be stepped up.

With extra food inspectors deployed, raids on unlicensed food hawkers by the USD and the RSD will also be intensified. Their actions will be supported by police.

The USD is also intensifying its food monitoring program and plans to take samples of foods which may have been contaminated. Dr Lee said the USD and the RSD have also put more emphasis on health education for food handlers.

The Housing Department, the USD and the RSD will also crack down on squatter areas, resettlement sites and any other areas where sanitation needs to be improved.

Dr Lee said the actions will be concentrated on areas where some of the cholera victims live — Kwun Tong, East Kowloon and Sha Tin.

He said the six newly confirmed cases had come from the Kwun Tong and Sha Tin areas.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for the Medical and Health Department said that out of the 10 recently confirmed cases, a 60-year-old woman and a 60-year-old man, both Kwun Tong residents, were in fair condition last night in the isolation ward of the Princess Margaret Hospital. Eight others were in satisfactory condition.