

# 1,000 pak-pais move into NT

## Illegal taxis hinder public transport plans

By TIMOTHY JIM

A large fleet of illegal pak-pais and hire cars is operating throughout Hongkong due to loose enforcement of the Government's road traffic law.

It is estimated that at present about 1,000 pak-pais are actively operating in the New Territories, about 150 on the Island and an uncountable number in Kowloon, according to various transport sources.

They are beginning to hinder the operations and development of other modes of public transport — taxis, mini-buses and buses.

The controversial decision to create contract hire cars was taken by the Governor-in-Council earlier this year to discourage private car ownership and ease traffic congestion.

But lax control on their activities is making them a "white elephant on our roads," one transport operator said.

The Kowloon Motor Bus Co recently lodged a complaint to the Transport Department, saying pak-pais were hindering its route development programme.

The company cited Shatin as the most serious problem area, according to transport sources.

Recent developments are particularly worrying in the urban areas since the Govern-

ment granted a total of 1,290 permits — 240 in Kowloon, 185 on Hongkong Island and the rest in the New Territories — to inaugurate the contract hire car service in August.

The licences were originally intended to provide a car service from a designated address. Hiring would be by prior booking.

It was also clearly laid down in the condition of service that no distinguishing marks be displayed to enable prospective customers to identify permit hire cars.

But many smart hire-car permit holders have thought out ways of getting round the strict rules.

The most common method used to help customers identify hire cars is to display a colourful sticker on their windscreen and use the same make of vehicle as most taxis.

Illegal hire cars usually cruise in Central near the Mandarin Hotel and the Queen's Theatre during rush hours and in other hotel and tourist areas.

There are also many near the Wanchai ferry pier on

football and horse racing days.

In Kowloon, the black spots include Wang Tau Hom, Ngau Tau Kok, Kun Tong and Lei Muk Shu in Kwai Chung.

Because of the established relationship between customers and pak-pai operators, few complaints are made.

In the New Territories, most pak-pais operate in the form of seven-seater vans between fixed destinations and on regular routes.

The most popular pick-up points are near the theatre in the centre of Yuen Long.

Recently, some 20 pak-pai operators moved into the Shatin district and launched a highly profitable service between Shatin and Yuen Chau Kok — where a few thousand fire victims are resettled.

The SCM Post learned that complaints against illegal pak-pai activities on the Yuen Chau Kok run had gone unheeded because most of the operators are auxiliary policemen.

And because law enforcement units are allegedly involved in some of the racketeering activities are difficult to

The police usually cite limited manpower as the reason for tolerating pak-pai activities.

It was revealed that in the first Wong Tai Sin District Board meeting on May 26, police attention was drawn to pak-pai activities in Wang Tau Hom.

On September 29, in another district board meeting, a senior police officer from the Wong Tai Sin station, Mr Patrick Cheung, replied that "his staff resources available in combating pak-pai activities were limited," according to a minute of the meeting.

A police spokesman said the police are aware of the existence of pak-pai activities in parts of the New Territories.

But in view of the poor public transport system, their activities have been tolerated.

He said the police investigated the allegation of pak-pais in Wang Tau Hom.

But all efforts — including the planting of undercover agents — could not prove that pak-pais were active in the urban area.

He said the force was not aware of the allegation that auxiliary policemen are involved in pak-pai rackets, like Yuen Chau Kok.

An SCM Post source also said that a crew had been recently sent to film pak-pai activities in Lei Muk Shu, Kwai Chung, to collect proof for the Transport Advisory Committee.

The move was instigated by an unofficial member and members of the Police Traffic Branch were told of the plan.

But information leaked out and the filming crew returned empty-handed, the source said.

At present, prosecution of illegal hire car operators lies in the hands of the police department. But few arrests, about one each day in the New Territories, have been made.

It was also learned that the Transport Department is aware of most pak-pai rackets and warned the Government of the difficulties before the decision on licensed hire car was made by the Governor-in-Council.