

HAWKERS

'A big mess-up from the start'

By Raymond Yao

HAWKING has been a headache for Hongkong's administrators for more than 140 years. Numerous efforts have been made to control and, if possible, to eliminate the practice rather than integrating it into the overall retail distribution network. Allowing hawking in special areas within set hours seemed to be the only cheap and feasible solution to the unemployment problem. So, the Government this month launched its Hawkers Permitted Areas scheme.

The scheme, however, got off to a violent start with a chaotic scramble among hundreds of hawkers for more lucrative sites in the permitted areas. The first day saw clashes between the street vendors with the police and the Urban Services Department personnel, which culminated in a siege of the Shamshui Police Station where about 40 hawkers were booked for obstruction. The unruly situation and the dissatisfaction among the hawkers over some restrictive measures also created a favourable climate for some radical youth groups to move in and manipulate the situation to push their militant, anti-Government line.

Conflict over hawker policy is not unusual inside the Government. One top-level European civil servant reportedly described the whole scheme as "a big mess-up from the start," while protagonists contended that it was the lesser of two evils in the light of the recessionary situation and the possible consequences should the Government turn a blind eye to the reality or take a hard line on the thousands of "illegal" hawkers peddling in urban areas.

"It is not what is generally believed to be a liberalisation of the hawker policy," explained one high-level source. "It is rather a measure to group the hawkers together so that a more effective control can be exercised over their activities." He admitted, however, that the scheme (which is at present on a six-month trial basis in 27 streets in densely-populated Kowloon) has opened Pandora's Box.

There are 32,000 licensed hawkers in urban areas on both sides of the Hongkong's harbour. A similar (possibly much bigger) number of hawkers are also peddling in the street "illegally," competing unfairly with the former group, which pays licence fees, and with small shop owners who pay rent, rates and taxes. As a result of the scheme shop owners and licensed hawkers have also joined in the free-for-all, setting up extensions and separate stalls in the streets in a bid to maintain their shares of the market.

Many hawkers, licensed or not, deliberately stay out of the permitted areas, flouting the regulations and risking arrests and fines. How the Government is to tackle this problem without causing a heavy drain on its manpower and resources will be interesting to watch. It is indeed a dilemma for the authorities. There is a possibility that the whole scheme will fall to pieces with hawkers taking over the pavements, spilling on to main roads, obstructing traffic, creating fire hazards and turning the three-year-old Keep Hongkong Clean campaign into a farce. "Anti-authority" sentiment could develop.

Two other deeply-rooted problems thwarting the effective implementation of hawker policies are the manpower to enforce the regulations and the provision of adequate space to accommodate the hawkers. However, something done is better than nothing done at all. Hawking at the moment can at least provide people with some kind of employment.