

\$1.8m anti-shark battle

By PAUL GODFREY

AS the first sunny weather for weeks lured people to Hongkong's beaches yesterday, the Regional Services Department announced it was spending \$1.8 million to protect the public from shark attacks.

The move follows two deaths by shark attack last summer, and the ensuing closure of almost all the territory's beaches.

Measures to be adopted at the 28 department-run New Territories and islands beaches include hiring an

extra 27 lifeguards as look-outs, advertising and publicity drives to educate beachgoers on the dangers, and improvements to lookout towers.

The additional lifeguards will be stationed at beaches during the peak swimming period from June until the end of August.

On Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays during this period, an extra two guards will be posted at each beach, swelling the ranks of Regional Services' lifeguards by 83 to a total of 464.

The package has been put

together by Regional Services assistant director Mr David Chiu Yim-shun, who headed a six-month study into preventing shark attacks.

The use of shark nets was rejected in favour of measures considered more practical and cost-effective.

The Regional Council, on learning that the nets would cost about \$70 million and be of dubious effectiveness, agreed. The council gave Mr Chiu three months to come up with alternative measures.

"What we have gone for is a mixture of extra man-

power for greater vigilance, more education and improving facilities at the beaches," said Mr Chiu.

"The extra guards will be dedicated to looking out for sharks to provide an early warning system of danger. We will be constructing new lookout posts on high ground or raising existing ones to provide better vantage points for our observers and a wider view of the sea."

"In addition, we will be advising people not to swim alone, at night-time or early in the morning when sharks are more likely to swim close to the shore.

"We are also asking swimmers to keep within the swimming area as delineated by the floating boom-line.

"We will use promotional material and poster campaigns to get these messages over and try to familiarise beachgoers with the meaning of different flag signals used at our beaches."

He said it was impossible to predict what effect the events of last summer would have on patronage of beaches this year but said he hoped that common sense and calm would prevail.

Last summer alarm reached fever pitch as shark spotters gathered at beaches territory-wide, confusing any freak wave, shadow or piece of driftwood for a positive sighting of an "SLO" (shark-like object).

The Urban Services Department, which is responsible for 11 bathing beaches on Hongkong Island, rejected the use of shark nets last October.

It also plans to counter the shark problem by using lifeguards to step up surveillance, as well as warning flags and media announcements.