

# Airport barge safety talks

By NICHOLAS IONIDES

OFFICIALS are preparing for talks with China over "shoddy" safety standards and suspected smuggling by mainland barges bringing in sand for the airport project.

The departments — Marine, Civil Engineering, Customs and Excise, Immigration and Marine Police — have for more than a year been working to tackle the problems.

Virtually all sand barges coming from China had questionable safety standards and were often overloaded, said Senior Marine Officer in the Marine Department's Airport Core Programme Project Section, John Lambourn.

Many were thought to be bringing in smuggled goods and were manned by crews with inadequate training and no immigration papers.

But, he said, the actions the departments could take on the issue were minimal, because no international standards for the vessels existed.

Mr Lambourn said the Immigration Department was in difficulty because of legal questions on whether the crew of vessels were considered to have "landed" here, and the Marine Department and others were held back by a lack of resources to do proper on-board inspections.

"I am hoping we will be

in a position to go to Guangzhou and hold further discussions on how exactly we're going to approach the application of standards for these things . . . later this year or early next year," Mr Lambourn said.

"When we have that clear understanding we can proceed with our arrest and prosecution action. But we need a proper policy cover to do that because we will be arresting PRC nationals."

The five departments, which have held regular meetings on the subject, have drawn up a list of about 350 sand barges known to have called to Hong Kong, of which about 280 are registered with Guangzhou authorities.

But Mr Lambourn said the registered vessels were "no better on safety standards" than the unregistered ones.

"What we are most concerned about is the issue of safety for the crews," Mr Lambourn said.

The first discussions between the two sides were held in February, with an agreement on the sharing of information on suspected illegal activities.

Until the next discussions are held, that the departments hope will allow them to begin a joint crack-down, marine patrols and vessel inspections have been stepped up to gather more information to take to the negotiating table.