

S.C.M.P.

14 Nov. 1985

580 arson cases listed in 3 years



More than 580 arson cases had been identified by the police in the past three years, the Attorney-General, Mr Michael Thomas, said.

Mr Thomas said the Government considers the successful detection and prosecution of offenders as the most effective deterrent to arson.

Replying to a question by Dr Ho Kam-fai, he said in the three years ending September, 978 fires suspected by the Fire Services Department to have been started deliberately were referred to the police for investigation.

Of these, the police considered 588 as arson cases.

Mr Thomas said Fire Services personnel are under instruction to investigate what may have caused each fire.

If necessary, the department's investigation teams should conduct an inquiry.

The Fire Services Department runs training programmes for its officers on how to detect arson.

In 1983 courses conducted by an arson investigation specialist were introduced for selected officers.

So far, 150 fire officers have undergone training.

If the department suspects arson, the case is passed on to

the police for investigation.

The Fire Investigation Ordinance empowers the Commissioner of Police to take possession of any premises where a fire has taken place or where an arson attempt is suspected.

In such cases, the commissioner is required to make a report to a magistrate regarding the origin and circumstances of the fire.

The magistrate then must investigate the causes of the

fire, unless he considers an inquiry unnecessary.

"The fact that there are these special provisions for investigating the causes of fire indicate how seriously the Government takes arson," Mr Thomas said.

Under the law, the maximum penalty of arson is life imprisonment.

High Court sentences for arson over the past three years ranged from one to 12 years' imprisonment, he said.