**SCMP Article**

**Beware the high price of violence and disorder**

The shocking rioting in Mong Kok over the Lunar New Year should convince everyone to step back and ask what is happening to our community. If such disorder gets worse, the results for all of us in Hong Kong could be very severe.

Before I discuss why, I would like to go over some general points, even if they are not new.

First of all, this was not an uprising by the oppressed poor as the label “fishball revolution” might suggest. Nor was it some sort of joke or game. This was a riot: groups of people wanting trouble gathered to physically attack and throw rocks at police officers and set fires on the street. This behaviour involves serious criminal offences and deserves serious punishment.

Second, it is true that many young people feel disillusioned and unhappy about a lot of things. The big complaint is housing, and I know from my own contact with senior officials, including the chief executive, that this huge problem is the administration’s No 1 priority. For the first time in decades, we have a government determined to fix this.

Another thing I know from my own experience is that young Hong Kong people are big fans of local culture and heritage. I find it very encouraging that the young generation is taking a pride in their city, and often taking a lead in promoting conservation and local traditions.

But it is worrying that local radicals can hijack a cause like street food hawkers to push their own trouble-making. They identified a popular subject and are tapping into public sympathy for traditional cart food and for the little guy struggling to compete with big business.

District councils and government agencies should be sensitive to the public mood. The authorities could do more to enable small traders to operate in a safe and orderly way. We should not give radicals an opportunity to play at “defending” our heritage or the little guy trying to make a living.

My main concern is what could happen to us in Hong Kong if things get worse and mob violence starts to break out on our streets on a regular basis.

If this carries on, where does it end up? If disorder of this sort becomes a regular occurrence, it will inevitably damage Hong Kong’s reputation for stability. Just a perception of increased risk can be enough to damage our society and economy, and reduce confidence.

If investors and residents feel there is a real danger of major property loss or a real threat of physical violence, businesses and families would ask whether it makes sense to stay here.

Potentially, that would be just the beginning of the tragedy. Our police force is well staffed, well trained and well equipped, but it is essentially designed to serve a law-abiding and stable society. There are limits to its capabilities – whether or not it buys a few water cannons.

What would happen if disturbances become so severe that the police cannot maintain control? What happens if the government of Hong Kong loses its authority over part of the city?

I think most of us probably know the answer, though it is something we prefer not to think about.

Article 14 of the Basic Law specifically makes it clear that Hong Kong is responsible for maintenance of public order within the special administrative region. It also says the local government may, if necessary, ask Beijing to authorise the People’s Liberation Army garrison to help in maintenance of public order or disaster relief.

No one would object to the PLA helping out after a disaster. But I am fairly sure that we would not want to see them coming onto the streets to restore order if the local authorities lose control. I do not want to think what would happen. Let’s say that Hong Kong’s reputation, community and economy would never be the same again.

I am not trying to be alarmist. But young hotheads must be aware that violence could have far worse consequences for our home city than they realise.