**SCMP Article**

**Deadly storms a warning to HK to be prepared**

Typhoon Hato, which swept through Hong Kong just over three weeks ago, was the first Number 10 signal since 2012. Businesses and flights were disrupted, schools and offices closed, and some villages and estates near the shore suffered flooding.

Overall, though, Hong Kong came through the storm in good shape. Fortunately, no deaths were reported here. Despite loss of business and some property damage, most of us managed to stay safe indoors, and life got back to normal the next day.

This was not the case for our neighbours in Macau. My company is a major general insurance provider in Macau. I visited the city several days after the typhoon had passed through to get an idea of the damage. By the time I arrived, the waters were no longer waist-high, and a serious clean-up operation was under way. But the amount of damage was obvious – and far worse than anything we experienced in Hong Kong.

Casinos and hotels experienced significant disruptions in operations and visitor arrivals. But it was the smaller businesses and households that really suffered from basic losses and damage.

Small factories and stores lost inventory in the flooding. The electricity supply was cut, so large quantities of refrigerated food had to be thrown out. Homes and vehicles were damaged. My company is looking at a total gross loss of more than HK$100 million. Insurers as a whole will be paying out billions.

In human terms, each instance of property damage or inventory lost can mean years of wasted effort for a small entrepreneur and trauma for a family. On top of that, more than 200 people were injured in Macau. The final death toll was 10. People in Macau said it was the worst disaster to hit them in more than 50 years. They resented what they see as criticism of Macau’s lack of preparedness. The public there were grateful that PLA soldiers came out to help, while some people in Hong Kong wondered why it was necessary.

To be fair, Macau is a small place. Its population of 650,000 is barely bigger than Sha Tin district’s 630,000. Inevitably, it has far fewer emergency service personnel and vehicles that it can draw on when needed.

Geographically, it is very exposed to extreme conditions like the storm surge that took place during Hato. Many of the older parts of town are low-lying and very densely populated, while the tourist Cotai Strip is mostly reclaimed.

But it is certainly true to say that Hong Kong was better prepared. This was not always the case. For example, Typhoon Wanda in 1962 caused more than 180 deaths here. It is because of such past disasters that we have invested billions in major flood-prevention projects.

We don’t see the four huge drainage tunnels that divert storm water away from the hillsides out to the sea (in Tsuen Wan, Kai Tak, Lai Chi Kok and Western Hong Kong Island). Many of us are not even aware of the giant underground storage tanks that can temporarily retain excess water in places like Mong Kok, Happy Valley and Sheung Wan (they are usually beneath playing fields).

In rural areas, river widening and village flood protection systems are more visible, but nonetheless taken for granted. These and our storm sewers and other drainage facilities are crucial. Without them, major storms would cause extensive property damage and possibly loss of life. Because we have them, most of us carry on the next day after a major typhoon.

Another reason Hong Kong came through Hato pretty well is that we have our own electricity supplies, while Macau relies on mainland generators. Our power companies like to justify the Scheme of Control Agreement – which guarantees them a rate of return – on the grounds that our power supplies are so reliable.

Some say we should open up our electricity market to mainland competition. That debate will probably continue, but the Macau experience is a reminder of the importance of a dependable power supply.

Hong Kong can congratulate itself on being prepared. But rather than mock Macau, we should see what happened there as a warning.

The recent storms in Texas and the Caribbean should also make us think. Like those and other places, we are developing low-lying areas for a growing population, and we are contributing to climate change. We may not be so lucky next time.