

Announcement by Judiciary

The following is issued on behalf of the Judiciary:

The Judiciary today (February 21) announced that in view of public health considerations, all hearings of the courts/tribunals originally scheduled from February 24 (Monday) to March 1 (Sunday) will generally be adjourned to a date to be fixed. Despite the general adjournment, the courts will continue to handle urgent and essential hearings/matters during this period.

The continuation of the general adjournment from February 24 to March 1

The decisions to generally adjourn court proceedings and close court registries/offices and to extend the current general adjournment period until March 1 were made after striking a careful balance between public health considerations on the one hand and the public interest involved in the due administration of justice on the other. To minimise the risk of outbreak of COVID-19 in the community, every sector in Hong Kong, including the Judiciary, has its responsibility. In the case of the Judiciary, efforts are made to minimise the flow of people in court premises and avoid the gathering of crowds in confined areas such as courtrooms and registry areas as far as practicable. For this purpose, court hearings have been limited to those which are urgent and essential, and that in conducting such urgent and essential hearings, a whole range of preventive measures are being put in place, including reducing the number of public seats available in courtrooms. At the same time, the Judiciary has continued to deal with other urgent and essential business on paper during the adjournment period as and when required.

The general adjournment and its duration are unprecedented. The Judiciary recognises the impact it has on the daily operation and businesses of the courts, and the concerns it may have caused for court users and the public. During the past few weeks, the Judiciary has been constantly reviewing the scope of urgent and essential businesses, and making adjustments on a regular basis, bearing in mind that the longer the general adjournment has become, the more matters may become urgent and essential. As a result of the latest review, an updated list of urgent and essential matters will be effective from February 24. These would include fresh remand cases, urgent and essential criminal matters including bail-related and sentencing hearings, handing down of judgments for cases with urgency or great public importance, and other urgent applications to the courts. In addition, the courts will, as far as practicable, handle matters which can be dealt with by paper disposal.

Court/tribunal registries and offices will continue to be closed until March 1, except for providing support for the handling of the above urgent and essential court hearings/matters.

Enhanced measures to support the handling of urgent and essential court businesses effective from February 24

The Judiciary recognises that as the continued prolongation of the general adjournment, there is a need to enhance various measures so that more urgent and essential matters could be handled effectively. Such measures include the following:

(a) Judges and Judicial Officers will, as far as practicable and as permitted by law, pro-actively manage both civil and criminal cases which have fallen within the adjournment period and cases which are listed in the following two weeks on a rolling basis, and to give directions to parties concerned on paper;

(b) For civil cases:

(i) Judges and Judicial Officers will strive to deal with court businesses and applications, in particular interlocutory applications, by paper disposal as far as practicable; and

(ii) There will be greater use of electronic means (e.g. emails) for receiving documents from parties to facilitate paper disposal and avoid physical attendance at court premises; and

(c) For criminal cases where the presence of the defendant or an appellant is required under the law, urgent and essential cases will be identified under the proactive case management by the Judges and Judicial Officers, and would be suitably handled.

In coming up with the enhanced measures, the Judiciary has been in close communication with all relevant external stakeholders, including the Bar Association and the Law Society, and have taken their views and suggestions into account as appropriate. The Judiciary will continue to closely liaise with all stakeholders in working out any further arrangements. Any further enhancement measures will be announced in due course.

Preparation for resumption

The Judiciary is also actively preparing for the resumption of proceedings and the re-opening of court registries/offices for all levels of courts/tribunals when the public health situation permits. In working out the detailed arrangements, the following principles would be adopted:

(a) An orderly resumption of both registry businesses and court proceedings is of the paramount importance;

(b) A staggered and progressive approach is to be adopted to ensure orderly resumption; and

(c) Parties concerned, be they legally represented or litigants in person, will be given clear notifications and sufficient lead time for preparation of their cases, regardless of whether the hearings are to be reâ€‘fixed or proceed as scheduled.

In working out the detailed resumption arrangements, the Judiciary will continue to closely liaise with all relevant stakeholders. Once the arrangements are ready, public announcement(s) will be made at the appropriate time(s).

Enquiries and information update

For enquiries regarding general arrangements on the court businesses during the period, the following hotlines are being operated from Monday to Friday 10am to 1pm and 2pm to 4pm:

- General Information: 2869 0869
- Court of Final Appeal: 2123 0123
- High Court: 2523 2212
- Probate: 2840 1683
- District Court: 2845 5696
- Family Court: 2840 1218
- Lands Tribunal: 2771 3034
- Labour Tribunal: 2625 0020
- Small Claims Tribunal: 2877 4068
- Magistrates' Courts: 2677 8373

The Judiciary will continue to post updated information, including Daily Cause Lists, messages related to the Judiciary's arrangements arising from public health considerations, and advice to court users visiting the courts during the general adjournment period, on the Judiciary website (www.judiciary.hk). Court users are advised to check the website for updated information as necessary.