

Anti-epidemic measures for air crew strengthened

A Government spokesman said today (November 12) that the Government is deeply concerned about the two imported cases of COVID-19 involving locally based cargo crew. The Government will further enhance the prevailing anti-epidemic measures applicable to air crew, with a view to maintaining smooth air cargo services into and out of Hong Kong and addressing the basic daily needs of society, while safeguarding public health.

The Transport and Housing Bureau (THB) promptly had a meeting with the airline concerned regarding the two cases, and directed the airline to expedite its investigation, submit reports and take follow-up action. The THB also urged the airline to strictly comply with the relevant requirements under the anti-epidemic measures in order to prevent the importation of cases.

As a matter of fact, the THB has all along been closely communicating with the aviation industry to ensure that the essential air cargo services into and out of Hong Kong would not be disrupted, while exercising vigilance against any potential public health risks. The prevailing anti-epidemic measures applicable to air crew are formulated on a risk-based approach, building upon the robust closed-loop operation for air crew. Cargo crew operate flights without passengers, and therefore, should have no potential risks in relation to interactions with passengers. Under closed-loop operation, they also have no direct interaction with the local community, and are subject to self-isolation at hotel rooms arranged by airlines and point-to-point transportation between airports and hotels during their stays at outports. They are required to undergo testing upon arrival at Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA) and are subject to self-isolation and/or medical surveillance depending on circumstances such as the outports at which they have stayed and the nature of their flight duties. During their stay in Hong Kong, they are also required to undergo regular testing in order to monitor their health conditions on a continual basis.

The Government has to stress that despite the ongoing epidemic, there remains strong demand for air cargo services, which are necessary for the transport of daily necessities, personal protective equipment, pharmaceuticals and vaccines etc. into Hong Kong. Hong Kong continues to serve as an international air cargo hub under the pandemic, connecting markets and supply chains in the Mainland and other parts of the world. HKIA handled 4.5 million tonnes of cargo with a total value of \$3,500 billion in 2020, accounting for about 43 per cent of the total value of Hong Kong's external trade. It is necessary to ensure the essential air cargo services into and out of Hong Kong would not be disrupted, so that the normal operation of Hong Kong's economy and even the global supply chain can be maintained.

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To counter the risks arising from the latest developments of the

COVID-19 epidemic and mutant strains, the THB has reviewed and considered enhancements on all possible fronts, and has requested airlines to carry out the following measures as a matter of priority:

1. Assigning on-site personnel to monitor cargo crew layovers at outports and stepping up independent auditing, to ensure crew members' compliance with the requirements under closed-loop operation and to minimise their infection risks;
2. Imposing more stringent restrictions on local cargo crew's movements during their medical surveillance periods, promulgating clearer guidelines and strengthening monitoring, with a view to minimising their contact with the local community;
3. Imposing daily post-arrival testing for returning local cargo crew, in order to strengthen the continued monitoring of their health conditions; and
4. Mandating all local air crew to receive their third doses of vaccines to offer themselves, travellers and the local community better protection.

The enhancements above should further manage risks, while maintaining the essential air services and supplies into and out of Hong Kong. The THB takes this opportunity to express gratitude to all practitioners in the aviation industry for their dedication to serve, maintaining the effective flows of people and cargo into and out of Hong Kong while adhering to the Government's measures on preventing importation of cases at the front line. The THB will continue to communicate with the aviation industry and relevant stakeholders, and will continue to closely monitor the situation and review the measures where necessary in order to uphold public health protection.