

Comprehensive tightening of inbound control measures to prevent spreading of Omicron cases to community

The Government announced today (December 20) that in view of the rapidly worsening global epidemic situation due to the Omicron variant, a series of measures will be implemented to further guard against the importation of cases, including:

- (1) tightening the flight suspension mechanism with immediate effect, apart from the existing suspension criteria, if four or more passengers are confirmed with COVID-19 upon arrival in Hong Kong from the same route within seven days, that route will be suspended for 14 days;
- (2) shortening the lead time for specimen collection for pre-departure nucleic acid tests for persons boarding for flights to Hong Kong from 72 hours to 48 hours with effective from December 24; and
- (3) requiring persons arriving at Hong Kong from Group A places with enhanced surveillance to undergo compulsory quarantine at a quarantine centre for the first four days of arrival at Hong Kong with effect from December 21. They have to undergo daily testing in the first seven days of arrival at Hong Kong, and to undergo testing on alternate days thereafter.

Additionally, in view of the latest global developments of the COVID-19 epidemic situation, the Government will impose measures applicable to Group A places with enhanced surveillance on persons who have stayed in the United Kingdom (UK), currently a Group A specified place, from 0.00am on December 21. Peru will be specified as a Group A specified place from 0.00am on December 23 to tighten the boarding and quarantine requirements for relevant inbound travellers.

Tightening passenger flight suspension mechanism

The passenger flight suspension mechanism aims to reduce the chance of importation of cases. As the pandemic ravages the world and the number of imported cases continue to climb, to further reduce the opportunity of importation of cases, the following criteria to prohibit specific flights from landing in Hong Kong will be tightened with immediate effect:

- (1) four or more passengers confirmed to have COVID-19 by arrival tests on any flights from the same original port of the same airline within a seven-day period (existing suspension criterion was two or more passengers confirmed to have COVID-19 by arrival test on any two flights from the same original port);

The other two existing suspension criteria remain in effect:

- (2) the same passenger flight has three or more passengers confirmed to have

COVID-19 by arrival test; or

(3) a passenger flight has one or more passenger(s) confirmed to have COVID-19 by arrival test and one or more non-compliant case(s) – i.e. failed to comply with the requirement(s) specified under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Regulation of Cross-boundary Conveyances and Travellers) Regulation (Cap. 599H), on the same flight.

Under the passenger flight suspension mechanism, the passenger flights from the relevant original port of the airline concerned will be prohibited from landing in Hong Kong for 14 days.

Shortening time limit for pre-departure nucleic acid test

The global epidemic situation continues to rebound as the more transmissible Omicron variant spreads rapidly. To further guard against the risk of importation of cases, the time limit for specimen collection for pre-departure polymerase chain reaction-based nucleic acid (PCR) test will be shortened to 48 hours (originally 72 hours) for all persons boarding for a flight for Hong Kong. All passengers who board a flight for Hong Kong (including passengers transferring or transiting in Hong Kong) on or after 0.00am on December 24 (Hong Kong time) should present at boarding a negative result proof of a PCR test for COVID-19 with specimen collected within 48 hours before the scheduled time of departure.

Group A places with enhanced surveillance

In response to Omicron cases, the Government has enhanced surveillance on specific Group A specified places since November 28. Apart from measures including denying non-Hong Kong residents from entering Hong Kong and the full vaccination requirement for Hong Kong residents, persons arriving at Hong Kong who have stayed in such Group A places with enhanced surveillance are subject to more stringent quarantine and testing arrangements, including undergoing compulsory quarantine at Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre (PBQC) for the first seven days, during which they have to undergo daily tests and their health conditions will be monitored by healthcare professionals, before being transferred by designated transport on the eighth day of their arrival at Hong Kong to finish the remaining 14 days of compulsory quarantine at the designated quarantine hotels (DQH), which they have reserved before coming to Hong Kong.

Based on observation, so far all imported Omicron cases in Hong Kong had been detected either by arrival tests or tests within the first three days of arrival at Hong Kong. In order to better utilise PBQC, the highest-standard quarantine facility, the Government will adjust the quarantine arrangements for Group A places with enhanced surveillance from December 21. Hong Kong residents who have stayed in Group A places with enhanced surveillance within 21 days are required to undergo compulsory quarantine at PBQC for the first four days upon their arrival at Hong Kong, during which they have to undergo daily tests and their health conditions will be monitored by healthcare professionals. On the fifth day of arrival at Hong Kong, they will be

transferred by designated transport to finish the remaining 17 days of compulsory quarantine at the DQHs which they have reserved before coming to Hong Kong.

At the same time, all persons arriving at Hong Kong that have stayed in Group A places with enhanced surveillance are required to undergo daily testing on the first seven days of arrival at Hong Kong, regardless of whether they are undergoing quarantine in a quarantine centre or DQH. Thereafter, they are also required to undergo tests on alternate days during the remaining 14-day quarantine period (i.e. the ninth, 11th, 13th, 15th, 17th, and 19th days of arrival at Hong Kong). Including the test conducted on arrival at the airport under "test-and-hold" and the compulsory test at a community testing centre on the 26th day of arrival at Hong Kong, the relevant persons will be tested a total of 14 times, so as to prevent any cases from slipping through the net.

Under the adjusted quarantine requirements for Group A places with enhanced surveillance, for inbound travellers who board a flight for Hong Kong on or after 0.00am on December 21 (Hong Kong time) and have stayed in Group A places with enhanced surveillance, the boarding documentary requirements will be updated as follows:

- (a) recognised vaccination record;
- (b) negative result proof of a PCR test for COVID-19 with specimen collected within 72 hours (on or before December 23) or 48 hours (from December 24) before the scheduled time of departure of the aircraft; and
- (c) confirmation of room reservation at a DQH for no less than 17 nights starting from the fifth day of arrival at Hong Kong.

The Government will implement a seven-day transitional period for the above adjustment. During the transitional period between December 21 and December 27, if a relevant inbound traveller presents at boarding confirmation of room reservation at a DQH for no less than 14 nights starting from the eighth day of arrival at Hong Kong (i.e. the existing requirement), he/she will still be allowed to board for Hong Kong. The relevant person will undergo compulsory quarantine in PBQC for seven days as per the current arrangement, and if the person successfully reserved a room at the original DQH from the fifth day to the seventh day during that period, he/she can be transferred by designated transport to that DQH to complete the remaining 17 days of compulsory quarantine. From December 28, inbound travellers will have to present confirmation of room reservation at a DQH for no less than 17 nights starting from the fifth day of arrival at Hong Kong in accordance with the updated arrangement.

Tightening boarding and quarantine requirements for places with Omicron cases detected and imported

To manage and prevent the importation risks posed by Omicron cases, the Government will continue to employ the most stringent measures to guard against importation of cases. Places where Omicron cases have been detected that may lead to local transmission and exportation of cases to overseas will be specified as Group A specified places. Meanwhile, the Government will also

closely monitor whether there are prevalent transmission of Omicron cases in overseas places, including imposing the more stringent enhanced surveillance measures on places (Group A places with enhanced surveillance) from which imported Omicron cases have been detected in Hong Kong.

In view of the detection earlier of two imported Omicron cases in Hong Kong from the UK, the Government will impose the above adjusted quarantine and testing arrangements applicable to Group A places with enhanced surveillance on the relevant inbound travellers from the UK who arrive at Hong Kong on or after 0.00 am on December 21. This quarantine and testing arrangement is currently applicable to inbound travellers from Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, the United States of America, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

In view of the detection of Omicron cases was confirmed in Peru, the Government will specify it as Group A specified place from 0.00am on December 23. Non-Hong Kong residents who have stayed there within 21 days will not be allowed to enter Hong Kong. Hong Kong residents can only board a flight for Hong Kong if they have been fully vaccinated and hold a recognised vaccination record. They will have to undergo compulsory quarantine in a DQH for 21 days upon returning to Hong Kong, with six tests to be conducted during quarantine, followed by compulsory testing in a community testing centre on the 26th day of arrival at Hong Kong.

Details on the relevant boarding and compulsory quarantine requirements for respective specified places can be found at www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/inbound-travel.html.

The Government will gazette the relevant updated specifications Cap. 599H to effect the above measures.