

Government adjusts boarding and quarantine arrangements for persons arriving from overseas places

Starting from April 14, the Government began implementing the tightened commercial passenger flight suspension mechanism to address the risk of importation of mutant strain of the virus from very high-risk places. The Government also announced the plan to shorten the quarantine period for fully vaccinated persons arriving from non-very high-risk overseas places on the basis of the "vaccine bubble".

A Government spokesman said, "The Chief Executive held a press conference on April 12 to elaborate on the Government's new direction in fighting the pandemic, which included the further tightening of the passenger flight suspension mechanism as a more targeted measure in stopping the importation of the virus into Hong Kong at the source. Meanwhile, the Government is planning to shorten the quarantine periods for persons arriving from non-very high-risk overseas places on the basis of the 'vaccine bubble' and in accordance with risk-based principles."

Tightened suspension mechanism for commercial passenger flights

The tightened flight-specific suspension mechanism took effect on April 14. The criteria under the tightened mechanism include: (1) three or more (originally five or more) passengers on a passenger flight arriving at Hong Kong confirmed to have COVID-19 by arrival tests; or (2) two or more passengers on any two flights of the same airline from the relevant original port within a seven-day period (originally three or more on two consecutive flights) confirmed to have COVID-19 by arrival tests. Another existing criteria, i.e. one or more passenger(s) confirmed to have COVID-19 by arrival test on the same flight with one or more passenger(s) failing to comply with the requirement(s) specified under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Regulation of Cross-boundary Conveyances and Travellers) Regulation (Cap. 599H), will remain unchanged. Under the mechanism, the Department of Health would prohibit the passenger flights from the relevant original port of the airline concerned from landing in Hong Kong for 14 days.

At the same time, a newly added place-specific flight suspension mechanism also took effect in parallel. If a total of five or more passengers among all flights from the same place, regardless of airline, were confirmed by arrival tests for COVID-19 with the N501Y mutant strain (variant of concern as identified by the World Health Organization) within a seven-day period, the Government would invoke Cap. 599H to prohibit all passenger flights from that place from landing in Hong Kong for 14 days, and would at the same time specify that place as an extremely high-risk place under Cap. 599H to restrict persons who have stayed in that place for more than two hours from boarding passenger flights for Hong Kong for 14 days, so as to prevent persons from the relevant place from arriving at Hong Kong via

transit. After 14 days, the relevant place would be specified as a very high-risk place, and passenger flights to Hong Kong from that place could resume, persons in the relevant place who fulfilled boarding requirements could also board for Hong Kong. However, they must undergo compulsory quarantine for 21 days upon arrival at Hong Kong, and the shortened quarantine period for fully vaccinated persons set out below would not be applicable.

Adjusted grouping for boarding and compulsory quarantine requirements

To implement the above arrangements, the grouping of boarding and compulsory quarantine arrangements will be further adjusted (details at Annex). Group A1 specified places will be extremely high-risk places (equivalent to the current Group A specified places), the newly added Group A2 specified places will be very high-risk places, while the current arrangement of Group B specified places as high-risk places, Group C specified places as medium-risk places, and Group D specified places as low-risk places will remain unchanged. Extremely high-risk places currently include Brazil, Ireland, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, and subject to the development of the epidemic and actual situation, the Government plans to specify in the first half of May these four places as very high-risk places (Group A2 specified places). As for India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and the Philippines from which there had been numerous recent imported cases including many with the mutant virus strain, they will also be specified as very high-risk places (Group A2 specified places).

Subject to the importation of cases and mutant virus strains from the relevant very high-risk places (Group A2 specified places), the Government will specify the relevant place as an extremely high-risk place (Group A1 specified place) in accordance with the aforementioned suspension mechanism as appropriate. On continued observation of the epidemic situation of a relevant place, including case incidence and vaccination progress, the Government may also consider lowering the specification of a specific place to high-risk place (Group B specified place) where appropriate.

Quarantine arrangements for fully vaccinated persons

Currently the Government already has in place very stringent inbound prevention and control measures, including requiring travellers arriving at Hong Kong to undergo "test-and-hold", as well as the arrangement of dedicated transport to transfer travellers to designated quarantine hotels for compulsory quarantine for 21 days, have so far effectively ensured "zero leakage" of cases with new virus variants into the community. As the global epidemic situation remains severe with the new virus variants still ravaging many parts of the world, the Government needs to maintain the 21-day compulsory quarantine requirement for persons who have stayed in high-risk places outside China.

"However, considering that the epidemic situations in certain places have stabilised and pose lower public health risks, with reference to the 'vaccine bubble' concept, the Government will adjust the quarantine arrangements for persons who have stayed in overseas places other than extremely high-risk and very high-risk places under the Compulsory Quarantine

of Certain Persons Arriving at Hong Kong Regulation (Cap. 599C), the Compulsory Quarantine of Persons Arriving at Hong Kong from Foreign Places Regulation (Cap. 599E) and Cap. 599H," said the spokesman.

The basic boarding and quarantine requirements will remain unchanged for high-risk and medium-risk places (i.e. Group B and Group C specified places), but the Government will supplement in due course new arrangements applicable to fully vaccinated persons and shorten the compulsory quarantine period for the relevant persons from 21 days to 14 days under the "vaccine bubble" concept. As for low-risk Group D specified places (i.e. Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore), the compulsory quarantine period for fully vaccinated persons will also be correspondingly shortened from 14 days to seven days in due course under the "vaccine bubble" concept. Persons that have completed quarantine under the adjusted Group B, Group C and Group D requirements will be required to self-monitor for seven days and undergo compulsory testing after their shortened quarantine.

The Government will announce at appropriate juncture the adjusted arrangement and the exact grouping of places after finalising the relevant details. The Government plans to gazette and effect the arrangements in about two weeks' time (i.e. late April or early May).

The Government spokesman said, "The Government will continue to closely monitor the situation, including the developments of the pandemic both globally and locally, vaccination progress, and changes in the volume of cross-boundary passenger traffic, and will further adjust the boarding and compulsory quarantine requirements for persons arriving at Hong Kong from places with different risks when necessary."