

# Government clarifies on necessity of quarantine exemption arrangement

With regard to criticisms that the quarantine exemption arrangement has brought about loopholes in the quarantine regime and that the latest wave of epidemic was attributable to the prevailing quarantine exemption arrangement, a Government spokesman emphasised today (July 19) that this is a misunderstanding.

The spokesman explained that the existing exemption arrangement under the compulsory quarantine regime is essential to maintain the necessary operation of the society and the economy, and to ensure an uninterrupted supply of all daily necessities to the public. The Government has been closely monitoring the risk and pressure on public health brought about by imported cases and would continue to adopt relevant coping measures in a resolute manner as necessary.

The spokesman pointed out that there had not been any confirmed cases of COVID-19 among exempted persons arriving from the Mainland, Macao and Taiwan.

Under the Compulsory Quarantine of Certain Persons Arriving at Hong Kong Regulation (Cap. 599C) and the Compulsory Quarantine of Persons Arriving at Hong Kong from Foreign Places Regulation (Cap. 599E), all persons arriving at Hong Kong, except those exempted by the Chief Secretary for Administration in accordance with provisions of the regulations, are subject to compulsory quarantine for 14 days.

The spokesman said that the purpose of the two regulations is to suppress the passenger flow so as to minimise the risk of disease transmission into Hong Kong. Nonetheless, it is necessary for the quarantine exemption arrangement to be in place to ensure the normal operation of Hong Kong on all fronts under the epidemic, including the need to safeguard adequate supply of food and necessities to Hong Kong, ensure normal governmental operation, sustain commercial activities in the interest of Hong Kong's economic development etc. The categories of persons exempted under the regulations are essential personnel which includes, among others, cross-boundary goods vehicle drivers, air crew, sea crew and foreign consular staff.

The spokesman clarified, "Since early March, Hong Kong has not recorded any imported cases from the Mainland. As for imported cases from foreign places, as non-Hong Kong residents have been denied entry to Hong Kong since March 25, the majority of the current imported cases concern Hong Kong residents returning from foreign places."

Since the implementation of the exemption mechanism, the Department of Health (DH) has been requiring exempted persons to undergo medical surveillance for 14 days during their stay in Hong Kong. Persons under

medical surveillance are required to wear masks and check temperature twice daily, and report to the DH on any discomfort. In addition, exempted persons are also subject to the temperature check and health declaration procedures carried out by the DH at boundary control points upon arrival.

The spokesman added, "In light of the latest situation of the COVID-19 outbreak and on the premises of protecting the health of Hong Kong people and safeguarding Hong Kong's robust healthcare system, we have enhanced the testing arrangement for exempted persons arriving Hong Kong from foreign places."

Currently, all persons exempted from quarantine entering Hong Kong from the Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA) are subject to COVID-19 testing in addition to undergoing medical surveillance for 14 days as aforementioned. All air crew and sea crew members must proceed to DH's Temporary Specimen Collection Centre at the AsiaWorld-Expo to have their deep throat saliva samples collected upon arrival at the HKIA.

In view that air crew members arriving Hong Kong from overseas make up the largest group of exempted persons, enhancing testing for this group of people can help further lower the chance of virus spread in Hong Kong. DH will continue to closely monitor the latest situation of COVID-19 around the world and review the quarantine and testing arrangements for inbound travelers entering Hong Kong from other control points including exempted persons.

The spokesman said, "The Government has been imposing additional exemption conditions in accordance with the risk level of respective exemption categories. For instance, we have requested shipping companies to arrange all crew members of cargo ships and passenger vessels to undergo nucleic acid tests at the point of departure within 48 hours before embarking to travel to Hong Kong. Only those who are able to produce negative test results should be arranged to travel to Hong Kong. If the above conditions are not met, the crew member will not be granted exemption and will be denied entry into Hong Kong. The shipping agents must arrange isolated accommodation and point-to-point transfers to and from the vessel for the sea crew members to ensure they will not enter public places."

In addition, for the categories of exempted persons arriving Hong Kong from the Mainland, regular COVID-19 testing arrangement has been put in place for cross-boundary goods vehicle drivers and cross-boundary students which form the two largest exemption categories.

The spokesman supplemented, "The Government has been closely monitoring the risk and pressure on public health brought about by a considerable number of imported cases and would continue to adopt relevant coping measures in a resolute manner as necessary. Having regard to the latest public health risk assessment, the Government has announced on July 18 to impose conditions on travellers who had visited the seven specified high risk places (i.e. Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines and South Africa), to reduce the health risk they may bring to Hong Kong. These

conditions include the provision of negative result of nucleic acid test for COVID-19 and confirmation proof of room reservation in a hotel."