

Government enhances anti-epidemic measures in view of severe epidemic situation

The Government announced today (February 3) that in light of the deteriorating COVID-19 situation in Hong Kong and that the number of new cases recorded daily stays high, a series of measures would be taken with a view to immediately enhancing Hong Kong's capacity in guarding against the epidemic and containing further spread of the virus.

The current epidemic development of Hong Kong is of grave concern. Over the past week, cases detected in Hong Kong have increased from 115 (January 28) to 121 (February 3). Although the overall increase may not be significant, the number of cases with unknown sources has raised from 6 to 31 per day. Such cases with unknown sources have exceeded 100 in total, involving various districts in the city and different industry sectors. At the same time, the number of samples tested positive under sewage surveillance has raised from 11 (January 28) to 21 (February 2), also spreading across the city. Different indications show that various silent transmission chains are still active in the community even though the mass outbreak in Kwai Chung district has subsided. It is worrying that the transmission chains show signs of spreading to various districts in Hong Kong with an increasing trend of cases to be recorded.

Given the incredibly high transmissibility of Omicron mutant strain, especially its BA.2 form, which clearly involves short-range air-borne transmission, the possibility of an exponential increase in infected cases is now on a rise. Although there are signs that Omicron is less likely to cause severe complications, it may still lead to a higher incidence of serious cases or death during mass infection. On the other hand, there is a continuous stream of local cases involving the more lethal Delta mutant strain. Recently, an unvaccinated person who was infected with Delta mutant strain turned critically ill with the need of admission to the intensive care unit. With Hong Kong facing the threat of both mutant strains, the outlook for epidemic development is not optimistic.

Since the beginning of the fifth wave of the epidemic last December, the Government has swiftly launched a series of anti-epidemic measures, including the implementation of the most stringent social distancing measures. However, public transport patronage figures show that the people flow within Hong Kong has merely dropped by around 20 per cent in the recent period as compared with regular days, which pales in comparison with the 30-50 per cent drop during the troughs for people flow under the previous waves. Besides, citizens were still having many social activities during the Chinese New Year. The Government expects that the number of infected cases may show a significant, or even exponential increase after the Chinese New Year. To avoid further worsening of the epidemic, the Government needs to adopt a

multi-pronged approach by rolling out anti-epidemic initiatives to reduce people flow through maintaining the most stringent social distancing measures and significantly enhance testing capacity for the virus. It is hoped that citizens may fully co-operate to achieve the objective of "early identification, early isolation and early treatment".

The Government again urges citizens to conduct tests early whenever they consider themselves at higher risk or show any mild symptoms. The Government will also adopt a more proactive testing strategy to identify patients and cut transmission chains in the community as early as possible, and calls for active co-operation from citizens in various testing operations. The Government has been working with contractors of testing services to enhance the testing capacity, aiming to significantly raise the daily maximum capacity of public and private laboratories from approximately 100 000 tests to about 200 000 tests before mid-February.

The Government will closely monitor cases and sewage surveillance results to conduct operations under restriction-testing declaration and compulsory testing notice. The Government will also distribute a mass number of COVID-19 rapid test kits to citizens in high-risk districts for them to conduct self-tests. In addition, the Government will adjust isolation and quarantine policies in a timely manner to make better use of treatment, isolation and quarantine facilities, with a view to providing treatment to severe patients, controlling infection risk and containing the spread of virus effectively. This serves to prevent a mass outbreak from paralysing the local healthcare system.

The Government strongly urges citizens to reduce social activities, and not to organise or participate in gatherings among families. Citizens are urged to stay home and not to go out unless necessary, especially for visits to crowded shopping malls, public facilities and places, to help contain the epidemic. This can prevent relatives and friends from being infected or classified as close contacts for quarantine or isolation, and also protect public health.

The Civil Service Bureau has announced that bureaux and departments would implement the special work arrangements from tomorrow (February 4) till February 11. Save for those involved in the provision of emergency services and essential public services and in anti-epidemic efforts, other government employees will be arranged to work from home. The Government calls on employers to follow suit and arrange their staff to work from home in order to minimise people flow and social contacts across the city.

The Government gazetted earlier the extension of existing social distancing measures till February 17 and announced that all kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools (including schools offering non-local curriculum) and private schools offering non-formal curriculum (commonly known as "tutorial schools") would extend the existing arrangements on suspension of face-to-face classes and on-campus activities until February 21.

The Government will closely monitor the epidemic development, review the situation from time to time and consider further tightening of social distancing measures, such as including more premises to be regulated under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F), tightening the restrictions on group gatherings in public places etc.

The Government is well aware that the extension of social distancing measures and closure of premises will inevitably affect different trades and relevant practitioners. Funding application will be submitted to the Legislative Council Finance Committee as soon as possible with an aim to activate the sixth round of Anti-epidemic Fund and assist the affected persons to tide over the difficulties under a compassionate approach.

A Government spokesman said, "The Delta and Omicron mutant strains are spreading in the community at the same time, posing unprecedented threat to Hong Kong. The epidemic situation of the fifth wave may be more severe than that of the previous four waves. Members of the public are urged to stay vigilant, wear masks properly and get vaccinated as early as possible in order to greatly reduce the risk of falling seriously ill and death when infected. With the concerted co-operation of the public in fighting the epidemic, Hong Kong will surely overcome the current epidemic situation."