

Government extends social distancing measures

The Government today (August 17) will gazette the latest directions and specifications under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F), the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G) and the Prevention and Control of Disease (Wearing of Mask) Regulation (Cap. 599I) to extend the existing social distancing measures with effect from 0.00am on August 19 for seven days till August 25. The detailed requirements and restrictions under the latest directions and specifications are in Annex 1.

A spokesman for the Food and Health Bureau said, "In view of the still severe epidemic situation and taking into account the latest public health risk assessment, the Government considers it necessary to continue to maintain highly stringent social distancing measures including continuing to require the cessation of dine-in services at catering businesses during specific periods and the closure of scheduled premises and to require any person to wear a mask at all times in public places."

The epidemic situation of COVID-19 in Hong Kong is still highly severe. Despite the fact that the number of daily new cases has come down from its peak in late July, it remains at a high level with the seven-day average still higher than the peak of the second wave in March/April 2020. Unlike the second wave which was brought about mainly by imported cases of returnees, the third wave is characterised by community infection with a widespread distribution geographically and across sectors. The latest virus strain is observed to have higher transmissibility, and its spread to elderly homes and elderly or chronic disease patients has brought about a rising mortality rate. The occurrence of new and growing clusters in settings such as dormitories for foreign domestic helpers and a workplace for port workers suggests that the risk of an explosive community outbreak and a rebound of the epidemic situation remains considerably high.

The stubbornly high proportion of new cases with unknown sources of infection at some 40 per cent and their widely varying trades and settings indicates that silent or sub-clinical transmission chains are prevalent in the community. It is highly worrying that such transmission chains persist despite extensive testing. Unlike the second wave which has been subdued much faster, the third wave is declining slowly notwithstanding the most stringent border control and social distancing measures being imposed since mid-July 2020. This wave is under way against the backdrop that internationally the epidemic situation and new infections are still on a rising trend. Many countries are experiencing new waves of infection after relaxation of social distancing measures and resumption of economic activities. Resurgence after long periods of having no detected infections with stringent border control in countries like New Zealand has also taken people by surprise. This

suggests that the third wave of the epidemic, which is the most severe Hong Kong has experienced so far, is far from over.

The spokesman said, "It has been over a month since the beginning of the third wave and the public is understandably starting to be fatigued by the social distancing measures. We understand that people are getting impatient over the prolonged quasi-lockdowns and they wish to start resuming social and economic activities. However, it is not yet the time for relaxation and there is no room for complacency in epidemic control. If Hong Kong wants to revert to a sustained low level of infection, the community needs to continue its vigilance in fighting the pandemic together. We would like to avoid the situation seen in many places where the increasing number of new cases has overwhelmed the healthcare system and resulted in a much higher death toll, while still wreaking havoc on the economy as a whole. We wish to reassure the public that the Government has been sparing no efforts in containing the spread of the disease."

The Government has tightened the testing and quarantine arrangement for sea crew members of goods vessels coming to Hong Kong for cargo operation, air crew members and other persons exempted from quarantine requirements since the end of July 2020. Surveillance and testing to detect cases of infection has been ramped up significantly with more than 700 000 tests conducted since early July, compared with about 350 000 tests between January and June. The launch of testing since mid-July for certain high-risk and high-exposure target groups such as elderly home staff, taxi and public light bus drivers, restaurant staff, market stall workers, frontline property management staff and foreign domestic helpers staying in boarding facilities has helped to extend the reach to catch the transmission chains, and the Government will continue to expand the target group testing. Contact tracing for confirmed cases is also being pursued in earnest to identify and trace the sources of infections and identify close contacts for quarantine to prevent further transmission in the community. The Government is also boosting its quarantine and isolation/treatment facilities to cope with the rising number of confirmed cases and close contacts, by expanding the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre, establishing a community isolation facility in Lei Yue Mun Park and Holiday Village, and setting up a quarantine facility and a community treatment facility in AsiaWorld-Expo. However, these measures alone cannot stop the transmission of the disease within the community when new cases remain at a high level and are distributed across different locations and sectors.

The spokesman said, "If we do not persevere and proceed with caution, the hard work the entire community has put in over the past few weeks to contain the third wave of infections would be in vain and we may see extensive transmission of COVID-19 across different locations, sectors and population groups in Hong Kong as well as our healthcare system on the verge of collapse again. To this end, we appeal to the public's co-operation and tolerance to maintain social distancing so as to cut the transmission chains in the community. With the Mainland's experience and support, the Government is also taking steps to expand our testing capacity so as to launch universal community testing and to expand our isolation/treatment capacity by building

an interim hospital alongside further community treatment facilities. These measures will help further curtail the epidemic situation and return us to the situation in May/June 2020 so that we would be in a position to lift the relevant restrictions and allow economic and social activities to resume as early as possible, as well as to help us prepare for a fourth wave or a winter surge."

The spokesman said, "In extending the social distancing measures, the Government has balanced the oft competing factors of public health protection, economic impact and social acceptance. At present, the severe epidemic situation does not allow any room to relax the social distancing measures. In view of the higher infection risks involved in eating or drinking without wearing a mask, we are working with the catering industry to implement more stringent infection control measures such as segregation of duties on serving food and clearing used tables/utensils among catering staff, no sharing of tables among strangers, use of additional chopsticks and spoons for communal use where applicable, and single directional seating or the alternative of enhancing ventilation of catering premises, with a view to preventing further outbreaks within catering premises. We appeal to the public and the trade to adopt and comply vigilantly with the stringent infection control measures when eating/drinking to prevent further spread of the disease and protect our vulnerable citizens and our healthcare system."

According to the World Health Organization and health experts, COVID-19 cannot be eradicated without effective treatment and vaccination. The Government is thus required to incorporate work in relation to disease prevention and control as well as infection management into the new normal of the daily operation of society. To this end, the Government has all along adopted the "suppress and lift" strategy in order to quickly adjust epidemic control measures having regard to the development of the epidemic situation. Experts have also suggested that a winter surge or a fourth wave coinciding with the usual influenza season is possible, and Hong Kong should get itself well prepared for that wave in all aspects. The Government will continue to closely monitor the developments of the epidemic situation and review the various measures in place from time to time with a view to making suitable adjustments taking into account all relevant factors.