

Government extends social distancing measures under Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance

The Government announced today (December 21) that it will gazette 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 maintain the social distancing measures currently in place. These measures will take effect on December 24, 2020 for a period of 14 days till January 6, 2021.

A spokesman for the Food and Health Bureau said, "The COVID-19 epidemic situation in Hong Kong is at the most serious and critical stage. Although the Government has extensively tightened social distancing measures for several times in the past month to suppress the latest wave of the epidemic, and the current social distancing measures are already the most stringent ones during the third wave of the epidemic, the number of confirmed cases in the past two weeks has remained at the peak level of around 80 to 100 cases daily, and the seven-day average number of local cases with unknown sources of infection has maintained at a high level of 31, without showing a clear sign of decline. Gathering activities in the community have not reduced; and even increased with festivals approaching. Crowds were easily seen during the weekend.

"Whether the epidemic situation will worsen, plateau or progressively decline in the coming few weeks will mainly depend on three factors. First, members of the public need to stay restraint during the winter solstice, Christmas and the New Year to avoid cross-families (i.e. among non-household members) gatherings especially mask-off activities, and celebrate the festivals at home or send their regards through modern visual technology. The Government also strongly appeals to private employers to fight the virus together and continue to arrange employees to work from home as far as possible, with a view to reducing all unnecessary gathering activities. Second, the general public need to maintain social distancing and good personal and environmental hygiene at all times. We should also be on alert in the public areas of residential buildings and the communal facilities in workplace, etc., wear marks properly and clean hands at all times, in order to stop the spread of the virus in the community. Third, the Government and members of the public need to join hands together to prevent the recent mutated virus found in the United Kingdom from entering into the community in Hong Kong."

"Taking into account the latest public health risk assessment, the Government will maintain existing requirements and restrictions applicable to catering business premises and scheduled premises, as well as the

requirements for group gatherings and mask wearing. We will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation. There is absolutely no room for relaxing any measures at this stage. Instead, depending on the epidemic development, we would not rule out the possibility of further tightening social distancing measures."

The details of the extended requirements and restrictions are as follows:

(I) Catering business and scheduled premises

(1) The requirements and restrictions applicable to catering business and scheduled premises (details at Annex 1) will be maintained during the 14-day period from December 24, 2020 to January 6, 2021, including the following requirements: from 6pm to 4.59am of the subsequent day, save for specific premises (details at Annex 2), a person responsible for carrying on a catering business must cease selling or supplying food or drink for consumption on the premises of the business; no more than two persons may be seated together at one table within any catering premises; bars or pubs will continue to be closed; and except club-houses and hotels or guesthouses, all scheduled premises regulated under Cap. 599F must be closed.

Persons responsible for carrying on catering businesses and managers of scheduled premises that contravene the statutory requirements under Cap. 599F would have committed a criminal offence. Offenders are subject to a maximum fine of \$50,000 and imprisonment for six months.

(II) Group gathering

(2) Unless exempted, the prohibition on group gatherings of more than two persons in public places will continue during the 14-day period from December 24, 2020 to January 6, 2021. The requirement is also applicable to group gatherings in catering business and scheduled premises regulated under Cap. 599F in which the relevant requirements or restrictions are not complied with.

Any person who participates in a prohibited group gathering; organises a prohibited group gathering; owns, controls or operates the place of such a gathering; and knowingly allows the taking place of such gathering commits an offence under the Cap. 599G. Offenders are liable to a maximum fine of \$25,000 and imprisonment for six months. Persons who participate in a prohibited group gathering may discharge liability for the offence by paying a fixed penalty of \$5,000.

(III) Mask-wearing requirement

(3) The mandatory mask-wearing requirement under Cap. 599I will be extended for a period of 14 days from December 24, 2020 to January 6, 2021. During the aforementioned period, a person must wear a mask all the time when the person is boarding or on board a public transport carrier, is entering or present in an MTR paid area, or is entering or present in a specified public place (i.e.

all public places, save for outdoor public places in country parks and special areas as defined in section 2 of the Country Parks Ordinance (Cap. 208)).

Under Cap. 599I, if a person does not wear a mask in accordance with the requirement, an authorised person may deny that person from boarding a public transport carrier or entering the area concerned, as well as require that person to wear a mask and disembark from the carrier or leave the said area. A person in contravention of the relevant provision commits an offence and the maximum penalty is a fine at level 3 (\$10,000). In addition, authorised public officers may issue fixed penalty notices to persons who do not wear a mask in accordance with the requirement and such persons may discharge liability for the offence by paying a fixed penalty of \$5,000.