

Government further adjusts boarding and quarantine arrangements for persons arriving at Hong Kong

The Government announced today (May 4) the continued suspension of passenger flights from India, Nepal, Pakistan, and the Philippines, and the continued restriction on persons who have stayed in India, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Brazil, and South Africa from boarding flights for Hong Kong from any place; and subject to no significant change to epidemic situation locally and in relevant overseas places, the lifting of the ban for persons who have stayed in Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK) on boarding for Hong Kong on May 7, to allow flights to resume from those places and for Hong Kong residents there to board for flights for Hong Kong, while these relevant persons would subject to the most stringent compulsory quarantine and testing arrangements upon arrival at Hong Kong.

Flight suspension mechanism and restriction on boarding for Hong Kong

In response to the emergence of the more transmissible new virus variants in different places, as a measure to prevent the importation of the new virus variants into Hong Kong, the Government announced late last year the specification of the UK, South Africa, Brazil, and Ireland respectively as extremely high-risk places (i.e. the existing Group A specified places) under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Regulation of Cross-boundary Conveyances and Travellers) Regulation (Cap. 599H), so as to restrict all persons who have stayed in those places from boarding a flight for Hong Kong.

In view of the sustained unstable epidemic situation and even large-scale outbreaks overseas, and with new virus variants, including many virus strains designated by the World Health Organization (WHO) as variants of concern, ravaging many parts of the world, the Government announced on April 14 this year the tightening of measures to guard against the importation of cases. Apart from the tightening of the existing flight suspension mechanism based on the number of imported cases that was applicable to specific flights of an airline, a place-specific flight suspension mechanism targeted at places where cases originated that made reference to the number of imported cases carrying new virus variants was also introduced, in which all passenger flights from that place would be prohibited, and all persons who have stayed in that place would be restricted from boarding a flight for Hong Kong from any place. Under the place-specific suspension mechanism, the Government announced on April 18 the implementation of the ban on India, Pakistan, and the Philippines, and announced on April 29 the implementation of the ban on Nepal, as well as the further tightening of the suspension mechanism, including that the mechanism would not be lifted automatically after two weeks, but would instead require regular reviews of the epidemic situation of the relevant places and whether

the ban could be lifted, before flights could resume and persons who have stayed in those places could be allowed to board for Hong Kong.

Under the existing place-specific flight suspension mechanism, if among all passenger flights from the same place, regardless of airline, a total of five or more passengers were confirmed positive by arrival tests for COVID-19 with the N501Y mutant strain or relevant virus mutation within a seven-day period, or a total of 10 or more passengers were confirmed positive by any tests (including tests conducted during quarantine) with the N501Y mutant strain or relevant virus mutation within a seven-day period, the Government will invoke Cap. 599H to prohibit all passenger flights from that place from landing in Hong Kong, and will specify that relevant place as an extremely high-risk place (i.e. the existing Group A specified 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, so as to stop persons from the relevant place from travelling to Hong Kong via transit.

Considering that the epidemic situation is still unstable in the existing extremely high-risk places, i.e. India, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Brazil, and South Africa, the existing restrictions under Cap. 599H will continue.

On the other hand, having considered the stabilising local epidemic situation and the relatively satisfactory vaccination rate in Ireland and the UK, the Government plans to lift the boarding restriction for these two places on May 7, on the condition that there be no significant change to the epidemic situation locally and in these two places. Persons returning to Hong Kong from these two places can board for flights for Hong Kong after they have obtained a negative result for a COVID-19 test with samples taken 72 hours prior to departure, as well as confirmation of a 21-night room reservation in a designated quarantine hotel. On arriving at Hong Kong, they will be subject to the "test-and-hold" arrangement for obtaining a negative result at the airport, after which they will be subject to 21-day compulsory quarantine in the designated quarantine hotel (undergoing at least three tests during the period), and compulsory testing on the 26th day of arrival at Hong Kong after completion of compulsory quarantine.

Adjusted grouping on boarding and compulsory quarantine requirements

To implement the more targeted risk-based approach on boarding, quarantine, and testing arrangements for persons arriving at Hong Kong under the new direction in fighting the pandemic, the Government announced on April 14 the adjusted grouping of boarding and compulsory quarantine arrangements: places outside China will be categorised under Cap. 599H into the extremely high-risk Group A1 specified places (equivalent to the existing Group A specified places), the newly added very high-risk Group A2 specified places, as well as the existing high-risk Group B specified places, the medium-risk Group C specified places, and the low-risk Group D specified places.

The adjusted grouping that the Government plans to implement on May 7 is stated as follows. The extremely high-risk Group A1 specified places will include India, Nepal, Pakistan, and the Philippines, the places where the place-specific flight suspension has been in effect since April, as well as Brazil and South Africa where the boarding restriction had been implemented earlier. The very high-risk Group A2 specified places will include Ireland and the UK. The specification for the high-risk Group B and medium-risk Group C specified places will remain unchanged. Meanwhile, the low-risk Group D specified places will include Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore (details at Annex).

Depending on the importation of cases and mutant virus strains from a place, the Government would specify that place as an extremely high-risk Group A1 specified place in a timely manner under the flight suspension mechanism mentioned above. Subject to the development of the epidemic situation in the relevant place, when flights to Hong Kong from that place could resume, that place would be specified as a very high-risk Group A2 specified place, such that persons from the relevant place who fulfilled the boarding requirements could resume coming to Hong Kong, but they must be subject to compulsory quarantine in designated quarantine hotels for 21 days (undergoing at least three tests during the period) and compulsory testing on the 26th day. 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) from very high-risk Group A2 specified place where appropriate.

Under the existing compulsory quarantine and testing arrangements, persons arriving at Hong Kong who have stayed in high-risk Group B specified places or medium-risk Group C specified places are both currently subject to compulsory quarantine in designated quarantine hotels for 21 days (undergoing at least three tests during the period). As for persons arriving at Hong Kong who have stayed in low-risk Group D specified places, they are subject to compulsory quarantine in designated quarantine hotels for 14 days (undergoing at least two tests during the period) and compulsory testing on the 19th day of their arrival at Hong Kong. However, based on the new direction in fighting the pandemic and the "vaccine bubble" concept as announced by the Chief Executive on April 12, the Government is planning to suitably shorten the compulsory quarantine period, based on risk levels, for persons arriving at Hong Kong who have not stayed in extremely high-risk and very high-risk places, and who have been fully vaccinated. The implementation date and details of the relevant measures will be announced separately.

The Government will gazette the relevant updated specifications 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 to effect the above measures on the new specified places grouping and the lifting of the boarding restriction for Ireland and the UK on May 7.

A Government spokesman said, "The Government will continue to closely monitor the situation, including the developments of the epidemic situation 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."

Details on the grouping of specified places and their respective boarding and compulsory quarantine requirements can be found at www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/high-risk-places.html.