

Government lowers response level in relation to COVID-19 epidemic to Alert Level

The Government announced today (May 30) the lowering of the response level under the Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance from the Emergency to Alert level with immediate effect, having taken into account the World Health Organization (WHO)'s latest advice on the COVID-19 epidemic situation (i.e. the COVID-19 epidemic situation no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern), as well as having assessed the latest local situation, risks and mutation of COVID-19 strains.

A Government spokesman said, "The lowering of the response level from the Emergency to Alert level marks a major milestone in Hong Kong people's fight against the epidemic over the past three years. Thanks to the support from and high compliance with various anti-epidemic measures by citizens and all sectors of the community all along, Hong Kong has achieved outcomes in combating the epidemic at the current stage. We are also grateful to our country for the unwavering support to Hong Kong, in particular during the most severe period of the fifth wave of the epidemic. The Central People's Government and the Guangdong Provincial Government co-ordinated supplies at the request of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, as well as arranged medical support teams and expert delegations to come to Hong Kong, providing assistance to the city at critical times. We would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to members of the public and all sectors in the community again for their hard work in combating the epidemic, as well as to our country's continued support to Hong Kong for its anti-epidemic work."

In the light of the lowering of the response level, the command structure of the Government has been adjusted. From now on, under the Alert level, the cross-bureaux/interdepartmental response work of the Government will be co-ordinated and steered by the Health Bureau (HKB) in lieu of the Anti-epidemic Steering Committee chaired by the Chief Executive (CE) when the Emergency level was activated. Relevant bureaux/departments are tasked to continue to take charge of subsequent follow-up work. The structure of the Command and Coordination Group (CCG) and the COVID-19 Expert Advisory Panel are also disbanded at the same time.

The spokesman said, "The Government is earnestly thankful to the experts for their valuable advice based on scientific and data evidence. They have been helping Hong Kong advance its anti-epidemic work."

Moreover, the Government will adjust the remaining measures and arrangements in relation to the epidemic accordingly. Among others, the Hospital Authority Central Command Committee, Emergency Executive Committee,

and Emergency Operation Command will cease operation. The epidemic situation will be monitored by clusters instead. The Emergency Response Centre under the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health will cease operation as well. The CHP will no longer announce the newly recorded positive nucleic acid test laboratory detections and newly recorded death cases related to COVID-19 on the COVID-19 thematic website daily. However, relevant surveillance data will be announced as usual in the weekly publication COVID-19 & Flu Express.

In response to the spread of COVID-19, the Government launched the Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance on January 4, 2020, and activated the Serious Response Level on the same date. In view of the ensuing epidemic development, the Government subsequently raised the response level to Emergency on January 25 of the same year, and that has lasted for more than three years. Having regard to the epidemic development, the Government has been summing up experiences in stages to optimise the epidemic responses on all fronts from time to time. While the virus has been evolving, the prevention and treatment capacities of the local healthcare system and the handling capacity of the society as a whole have been enhanced significantly with the concerted efforts of the whole community. The risk posed by COVID-19 to local public health has thus been significantly reduced to date.

Upon the cancellation of the arrangement of issuing isolation orders from January 30 this year, the Government has gradually established a system of the "new normal". With the lifting of the mandatory mask-wearing requirements from March 1, all social distancing measures applicable to the general public were lifted and the society has fully resumed normalcy. Under the prevailing system of the "new normal", COVID-19 is managed as an upper respiratory tract illness while anti-epidemic measures are now focusing on the protection of the high-risk groups. In this connection, having considered the WHO's latest advice and the assessment by the HHB, the CCG chaired by the CE has made the aforesaid decision to lower the response level.

The spokesman emphasised, "The WHO has pointed out that the pandemic is still ongoing. Meanwhile, the activity level of COVID-19 in Hong Kong still remains high. The Government will therefore continue to closely monitor the latest situation and risks of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases with an emphasis on protecting high-risk groups and keep a close watch of the WHO's latest assessments, making every effort to safeguard public health. We again strongly call on the citizens who have not completed the first three doses of vaccine, as well as persons in the high-risk groups who have yet to receive a booster dose per experts' recommendation, to get vaccinated as early as possible for protection of themselves and their family."