

Government refutes unfounded claims on further relaxation for group gatherings

In response to some comments saying that further relaxation of restrictions on group gatherings under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G) (the Regulation) involves political consideration, the Government's spokesperson pointed out last night (May 19) that these allegations were totally unfounded.

The Government has introduced statutory restrictions on group gatherings in public places with a view to reducing risks of virus transmission. No political considerations have ever come into play. The Government has all along adopted a "suppress and lift" strategy and made adjustments to measures to control the epidemic as appropriate while striking a suitable balance among public health, economic development and day-to-day operation of the society. Even though the situation in Hong Kong has become more stabilised in terms of the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the recent weeks, taking into account the local cluster cases last week without known sources, the impending school resumption, and concerns of the community and experts about whether the cluster cases would cause large-scale outbreak in the community, we are of the view that the current social distancing measures should generally be maintained for 14 days, including the restrictions on group gatherings, and will conduct further review having regard to the development of the epidemic situation.

According to provisions of the Regulation, the Government may exempt specific group gatherings. Exempted group gatherings are in general necessary for daily lives or are essential for maintaining the operation of the society. Taking into account the need for worshippers to participate in religious activities raised by religious groups, we consider that the restrictions on religious gatherings could be relaxed subject to fulfilment of appropriate infection control requirements. However, these gatherings are limited to those held at premises regularly used as a place of worship, rather than a full relaxation.

As for other various types of group gatherings at public places, the Government is of the view that the conditions are not present for us to allow full relaxation. That said, the Government will review relevant implemented measures from time to time having regard to the development of the epidemic situation. On one hand some social distancing measures will be maintained, on the other there will be room for gradual resumption of social activities, with suitable adjustments made to social distancing measures after considering all relevant factors. The Government does not rule out gradual relaxation of restrictions on group gatherings subject to the epidemic situation, for example, by adjusting the maximum number of persons allowed at a group gathering or introducing additional categories of exempted group gatherings.

Before the global epidemic is fully under control, the Government appeals to the public to stay vigilant, maintain an appropriate social distance from others as far as possible, and adopt necessary precautionary measures in crowded places, in order to cut the virus transmission chain.