

Government suitably adjusts inbound control measures on risk-based principle

In view of the latest developments of the epidemic situation, and considering the recent volume of inbound passenger flow and the corresponding number of imported cases, the capacity in tackling the local epidemic, as well as overall socio-economic needs, the Government announced today (April 22) that non-Hong Kong residents (HKRs) will be allowed to enter Hong Kong from overseas places and the route-specific flight suspension mechanism will be suitably adjusted with effect from 0.00am on May 1 (Hong Kong Time), and rapid antigen tests (RATs) will be added to the "test-and-hold" arrangement at the airport. The aim is, on the premise of maintaining the strategy to guard against the importation of cases and continuing stringent quarantine measures, and as far as risks could be properly managed, to alleviate as much as possible the uncertainty of Hong Kong-bound passengers' journeys in reserving flights and designated quarantine hotels (DQHs), as well as to streamline the testing and quarantine procedures upon arrival, in response to the needs of HKRs that need to return to Hong Kong as well as the strong demands from the relevant trade.

The Government's Inter-departmental Steering Committee cum Command Centre (Steering Committee) recently reviewed the situation since April 1 regarding the number of inbound flights and passenger flow, as well as actual imported cases. Although there has been an increase in the daily number of inbound arrivals since April 1 due to the lifting of place-specific flight suspension for nine overseas places (from a daily average of fewer than 300 inbound arrivals from January to March, to a daily average of about 1 200 inbound arrivals since April 1), the proportion of imported cases has actually decreased rather than increased (from about 3 per cent in January to March to about 1 per cent since April 1). Considering public health factors such as local epidemic development and capacity in tackling the local epidemic, and balancing the expectation from members of the public as well as the various sectors of the community to resume social and economic activities, the Steering Committee considers that there is room to suitably adjust relevant measures on the premise of maintaining the current measures guarding against the importation of cases and manageable risks.

Lifting the ban on non-HKRs entering Hong Kong

Due to the spread of the global epidemic, the Government has banned the entry to Hong Kong of non-HKRs who have stayed in various overseas places since March 25, 2020, in order to limit the volume of inbound passengers from overseas places. Considering that the public health risk associated with non-HKRs is the same with that of HKRs coming from the same places, that the overall volume of inbound passengers is controlled by the number of DQHs, and

that overseas inbound passengers are still subject to stringent inbound control measures including compulsory quarantine in DQHs under closed-loop management, the Government will, under the premise that the risks could be properly managed, allow non-HKRs who have stayed in overseas places in the past 14 days to enter Hong Kong from May 1 (Hong Kong Time) and be subject to the same boarding, quarantine and testing arrangements as HKRs. The relevant persons are required to comply with all stringent inbound testing and quarantine requirements, including being fully-vaccinated, undergoing pre-departure nucleic acid test with a negative result and the booking of DQHs, be subject to "test-and-hold" upon arrival, and be transferred to DQHs by designated transport to undergo compulsory quarantine, during which they will be tested multiple times.

Other boarding, quarantine and testing arrangements applicable to overseas inbound passengers remain unchanged. Details can be found at the Government's COVID-19 thematic website (www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/inbound-travel.html).

Route-specific flight suspension mechanism

On the premise of maintaining the measures to guard against the importation of cases, the Government has all along been requiring all airlines to stringently enforce the boarding requirements for inbound passengers, in order to reduce the risk of importation of cases from specific high-risk places as far as practicable. The Government has noted the views of various sectors of the community on the route-specific flight suspension mechanism, including that the relevant triggering thresholds are too harsh, where various routes were suspended upon triggering of the thresholds, which easily interrupted the return journeys of inbound persons (from April 1 to April 20, the suspension was triggered 25 times with the relevant routes suspended for seven days, affecting thousands of HKRs in preparation for returning), which caused persons returning to Hong Kong various problems as they are unable to return to Hong Kong as planned, and severely affected the operations of airlines.

As the flight suspension mechanism is one of the measures to control the volume of inbound arrivals so as to avoid the importation of a large number of cases from specific high-risk places within a short period of time, it needs to be maintained under the anti-epidemic strategy of guarding against the importation of cases. However, upon reviewing the latest data on inbound flights, passengers and imported cases, and noting that the epidemic situations in places around the world have mainly been caused by the Omicron variant, that the epidemic situations in overseas places with frequent traffic with Hong Kong have been on downward trends and are not much different from the situation in Hong Kong, and that the overall inbound volume and importation risk are controlled by the number of DQHs at the moment, the Government considers that the triggering thresholds can be suitably adjusted. From May 1, if on the same flight there are (i) five or more passengers, or five per cent or more of the total number of passengers on board the same flight (whichever is higher) tested positive for COVID-19

by arrival test, or (ii) three or more passenger are tested positive for COVID-19 by arrival test and one or more non-compliant case(s) was/were allowed to board for Hong Kong without complying with with the requirement(s) specified under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Regulation of Cross-boundary Conveyances and Travellers) Regulation (Cap. 599H), the passenger flights of that route from the relevant airline from the same origin place will be prohibited from landing in Hong Kong for five days.

Adding RAT to "test-and-hold" arrangement

Currently, all arrivals via the Hong Kong International Airport are subject the "test-and-hold" arrangement in the Temporary Specimen Collection Centre (TSCC) in the airport for polymerase chain reaction (PCR) nucleic acid tests, and only after confirmation of negative PCR nucleic acid test results can they be transferred by designated transport to DQHs for compulsory quarantine. The Steering Committee has reviewed the current operation of "test-and-hold" and considers that an RAT requirement can be added to ensure earlier detection of arrivals that have been infected for isolation arrangements, while arrivals with negative RAT results must continue to be subject to closed-loop management, and be transferred by designated transport to DQHs to wait for their PCR nucleic acid test results. This can further shorten the waiting time of inbound passengers at the airport to reduce crowd gathering, while maintaining stringent control of importation risks. Under the enhanced arrangement, when inbound passengers undergo PCR nucleic acid tests by professional swab sampling, specimens will also be collected for RATs at the same time. Relevant Government departments are making necessary preparations for the addition of RAT under the "test-and-hold" arrangement, which is estimated to be implemented in early May.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the epidemic situation of different places in accordance with the principles of guarding against the importation of cases, and will consider a basket of factors under the risk-based principle, including public health factors such as epidemic situation in particular places, testing rate, vaccination rate, volume of arrivals and actual imported cases, as well as the developments of the local epidemic situation and relevant local socio-economic factors to adjust the boarding, quarantine and testing arrangements for overseas arrivals based on risk levels as the situation warrants.