

Government supplements on quarantine exemption arrangement

In response to media enquiries arising from the Government's announcement on tightening of testing and quarantine arrangement for exempted persons, a Government spokesman today (July 26) provided the following supplementary information.

The mandatory 14-day quarantine requirement was imposed on all arrivals from the Mainland (and subsequently extended to Macao and Taiwan) from February 8 under Cap. 599C Regulation while that on arrivals from all other countries took effect from March 19 through Cap. 599E Regulation made by the Chief Executive in Council under the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance (Chapter 599). These Regulations were introduced to reduce population mobility between Hong Kong and other places in order to contain the spread of COVID-19 into the local community. Both Regulations contain specific provisions to exempt certain categories of people arriving Hong Kong by air, sea or land for legitimate purposes and empower the Chief Secretary for Administration as the approving authority for exempting either categories or individuals meeting those legitimate purposes such as government operations (applicable to HKSARG and other governments including consular staff based in Hong Kong), and people whose travel is to support the essential operation of Hong Kong or related to anti-epidemic work.

"Cross-border truck drivers totalling some 10 000, air crew operating cargo and passenger flights and sea crew of cargo vessels loading/unloading in Hong Kong come under the 'essential operation' categories and have been exempted since the commencement of the Regulations. These exemptions are essential to ensure an uninterrupted supply of goods and daily necessities and maintain the economy," a Government spokesman explained.

Regarding sea crew arrangements, in response to a global call for action to address the dire situation of seafarers stranded at sea because of COVID-19 and strong appeals from the local shipping sector, the exemption arrangements were extended in June to vessels without cargo operation involving seafarers coming to Hong Kong for crew change under very stringent requirements of "fly and embark" or "disembark and fly" without the need to stay in Hong Kong. However, in practice, there were genuine isolated cases of seafarers requiring to stay overnight in Hong Kong because of the scheduling mismatch of flight and vessel.

Though exempted from mandatory 14-day quarantine, exempted persons are issued with medical surveillance notices by the Department of Health and are asked to comply with precautionary and personal hygiene measures including the wearing of masks. In light of the frequency of cross-boundary trips by truck drivers, medical surveillance notices issued to them have a validity of 14 days. The total number of medical surveillance notices issued in a month or the total number of such notices issued (we notice the media was quoting a

figure of 290 000 which was the total number of medical surveillance notices issued so far) could not therefore be taken as the number of persons exempted under the said arrangement. For illustration, a cross-boundary truck driver commuting daily would have been issued over ten such notices since the commencement of the arrangement.

The above exemption arrangement has worked well in the past few months meeting the needs of Hong Kong amidst a major disease outbreak. With the epidemic situation stabilised in the months of April to June, additional exemption categories to facilitate cross-boundary business were introduced. But these have not been widely practised given the 14-day mandatory quarantine requirement introduced by the Guangdong authorities and the yet-to-be implemented mutual recognition of virus test results and exemption of designated cross-boundary travellers.

Based on risk-level assessment by the Centre for Health Protection, the Government has been adjusting its anti-epidemic measures especially under the "suppress and lift" strategy. In recognition of a recent increase in the number of confirmed cases of air crew and sea crew personnel, relevant departments have been discussing with airlines and shipping companies on measures to reduce any infection risks being brought into Hong Kong. The suspension and tightening measures were announced today (July 26) and they are to take effect from July 29 taking account of the flights and vessel callings planned. A wholesale cessation of the exemption arrangement will not be in the public interest.

Regarding the question of whether the tightening of testing arrangement put in place for air crew and sea crew should also be applied to arrivals via the two land border control points, the Government spokesman pointed out that any control measure has to be considered in the light of epidemiological evidence. In respect of arrivals from the Mainland, Macao and Taiwan, that is, under Cap. 599C, over 200 000 quarantine orders have been issued so far without a single confirmed case whereas for arrivals from other countries, that is, under Cap.599E, of the roughly 130 000 persons being put under quarantine, 728 cases were subsequently confirmed positive. A difference in treatment is thus justified especially having regard to the current limitation in testing capacity.

"The Government will continue to closely monitor the situation and adopt suitable measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 while ensuring as far as possible the essential operation of our city," the spokesman added.