

LCQ12: Epidemic prevention measures to guard against importation of cases

Following is a question by the Hon Jeffrey Lam and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (May 11):

Question:

From the 1st of last month, the Government has lifted the place-specific flight suspension mechanism implemented for Australia, Canada, France, India, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, as well as required that all Hong Kong residents who have stayed in overseas places must, upon their arrival in Hong Kong, produce: a recognised vaccination record, a negative result proof of a polymerase chain reaction (PCR)-based nucleic acid test for the coronavirus disease 2019 conducted within 48 hours before the scheduled time of departure of the aircraft, and a confirmation of room reservation in a designated quarantine hotel for at least seven nights from the day of arrival in Hong Kong (a person who meets the relevant conditions may choose to undergo self-monitoring for the subsequent seven days after completing the first seven days' compulsory quarantine in a hotel). In addition, from the 1st of this month, the Government has lifted the ban on non-Hong Kong residents entering Hong Kong, and non-Hong Kong residents coming to Hong Kong are subject to the same boarding, quarantine and testing measures for Hong Kong residents to guard against importation of cases. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has estimated the number of inbound flights from the aforesaid nine countries and the booking status for flight tickets, as well as the number of rooms provided by all quarantine hotels in Hong Kong and their booking status, in the coming three months; if so, how such statuses compare with those in the three months before the lifting of the relevant mechanism;

(2) how it can best implement the measures to guard against importation of cases, including (i) how to conduct contact tracing in a timely and effective manner when an inbound traveller is tested positive in a relevant virus test during the self-monitoring period, and (ii) how to prevent the recurrence of a situation similar to the one in the fifth wave of the epidemic in which an infection case in a quarantine hotel led to a community outbreak; and

(3) how it ensures that the negative result proof of a PCR-based nucleic acid test produced by an inbound traveller is issued by a laboratory or healthcare institution that meets the requirements of the Hong Kong Government?

Reply:

President,

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 allowed non-Hong Kong residents (HKRs) to enter Hong Kong from overseas places starting from May 1, and the route-specific flight suspension mechanism has been suitably adjusted with additional rapid antigen tests (RATs) 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.

In consultation with the Transport and Housing Bureau, my reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Jeffrey Lam is as follows:

(1) As commercial organisations, airlines generally formulate their flight operating plans based on commercial considerations such as the demand for air services, operating costs, etc. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, factors including the evolving epidemic situation, immigration and quarantine requirements of various jurisdictions have also become considerations based on which airlines adjust their flight frequencies. In practice, airlines are not required to submit to the Government the booking situation which is commercial information. Therefore, the Government does not have the relevant information.

In light of the development of the epidemic, the Government adjusted the place-specific flight suspension mechanism from April 1. In anticipation of the growing number of travellers, to meet the demand, the Government has adjusted the number of quarantine rooms in accordance with the actual situation, such that the number of rooms has gradually increased from around 6 000 rooms in end March to around 20 000 rooms now. The Government will closely monitor the supply and demand of DQH room and make adjustments when necessary. According to the room booking statistics provided by hotels, as at May 6, the overall booking rate for May was 60 per cent. As for January to March, the overall average occupancy rate was 42 per cent.

(2) The global pandemic situation remains severe. Under the policy of dynamic "zero infection", Hong Kong needs to continue to prevent the importation of cases, and cannot afford to drop its guard on the prevention and control measures for arrivals from overseas places. The SAR Government has all along been adopting stringent boarding, quarantine and testing measures to tighten inbound control measures for travellers arriving from overseas in order to build an anti-epidemic barrier to prevent the importation of cases, so as to prevent as far as possible the importation of cases into the community from outside of Hong Kong. Anyone who boards a flight for Hong Kong from overseas places has to comply with three basic requirements, including:

(a) Holding prior to boarding (i) a negative result proof of a polymerase chain reaction (PCR)-based nucleic acid test for COVID-19 conducted within 48 hours before the scheduled time of departure of the aircraft and (ii) confirmation of room reservation at a DQH for the required compulsory quarantine duration;

(b) Being subject to the "test-and-hold" arrangement at the airport upon arrival in Hong Kong; and

(c) Being transferred on board designated transport arranged by the Government to a DQH to undergo compulsory quarantine under closed-loop management.

All passengers who have stayed in any overseas places in the previous 14 days can only board a flight for Hong Kong if they have been fully vaccinated and hold a recognised vaccination record. The basic quarantine requirement for the relevant persons is to undergo compulsory quarantine for 14 days in a DQH. They are subject to daily RATs during the quarantine period, as well as PCR-based nucleic acid tests on the fifth and 12th days of arrival at Hong Kong. As the relevant persons have been fully vaccinated, as per the isolation and quarantine arrangements of local cases, if the results of the PCR-based nucleic acid test conducted on the fifth day and the RATs conducted on the sixth and seventh days are all negative, they can be discharged from compulsory quarantine earlier. However, they will be required to undergo self-monitoring for seven days, and undergo a compulsory PCR-based nucleic acid test on the 12th day of arrival at Hong Kong at a community testing centre or a mobile testing station, or arrange a self-paid test by professional swab sampling at a local medical institution recognised by the Government. If inbound travellers choose to complete the whole 14-day compulsory quarantine period in the DQH, they can only leave the DQH upon confirmation of negative results of the PCR-based nucleic acid test conducted on the 12th day and the RAT conducted on the 14th day.

As some of the imported cases were confirmed in DQHs, the Government has conducted in-depth investigation on each case to further reduce the risk of transmission. Additional infection control and monitoring measures will be formulated having regard to the results of investigation for compliance by all DQHs, including installing air purifiers in appropriate locations of all rooms and corridors; requiring hotels to strengthen ventilation and infection control measures; disinfecting rooms and common areas such as corridors thoroughly; reminding guests to wear a suitable surgical mask when opening the doors of their rooms; and requiring hotel staff to undergo regular testing.

If a patient involved in an Omicron case has stayed in a DQH, the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) will arrange for guests staying in adjacent or opposite rooms of the Omicron case to undergo daily testing until the seventh day after the patient has left the hotel. As for guests who stayed in adjacent or opposite rooms of the Omicron case at the same time but have already completed compulsory quarantine, the Centre will require them to

undergo additional testing in the community and recommend them to avoid group gatherings until they complete an additional surveillance period of seven days.

The compliance team of the Office of the Designated Quarantine Hotel Scheme will also monitor the daily operation of the hotels to ensure that they comply with all infection control measures.

Furthermore, the SAR Government has been adhering to the principle of "early identification, early isolation and early treatment" to prevent the spread of the disease in the community. The CHP conducts epidemiological investigations of confirmed cases and traces their close contacts, in order to identify people who have been exposed to those confirmed cases or close contacts through such investigations. Confirmed cases and close contacts will be arranged for isolation and quarantine according to the prevailing multi-tiered triage and treatment strategy to prevent community transmission. The CHP also conducts genetic analysis on the samples of confirmed cases to determine whether they are locally infected, imported or re-positive cases.

(3) Currently, all inbound persons who have stayed in overseas places or Taiwan can only board a flight for Hong Kong if they fulfil a number of requirements, including holding a negative result proof of a PCR-based nucleic acid test for COVID-19 conducted within 48 hours before the scheduled time of departure of the aircraft. The proof should include a test report in Chinese or English which bears the name of the relevant inbound person, that the test was a PCR-based nucleic acid test for COVID-19 and that the result was negative. The proof should also include documentary proof in English or Chinese to show that the laboratory or healthcare institution is ISO 15189 accredited or is recognised or approved by the relevant authority of the government of the place in which the laboratory or healthcare institution is located.