

LCQ14: Issues relating to the novel coronavirus epidemic

Following is a question by the Hon Wu Chi-wai and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (March 18):

Question:

Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus epidemic, demand for face masks in Hong Kong has remained high. Quite a number of members of the public and healthcare workers have demanded the Government to "close all border control points" to curb the spread of the epidemic to Hong Kong, but the Government has refused. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows, in the past six months:

(i) the respective weekly quantities of (a) import, (b) export, (c) re-export and (d) net import of face masks effective in filtering viruses, and
(ii) the respective monthly quantities of such face masks produced by the Correctional Services Department (CSD) and local private enterprises and, among such face masks, the respective quantities of those for local consumption and for export;

(2) as a healthcare team of the University of Hong Kong has projected that the epidemic in Hong Kong will reach its peak in May this year, of the Government's projections for the coming three months in respect of:

(i) the overall demand in Hong Kong for face masks effective in filtering viruses, and
(ii) the weekly quantities of such face masks which will be (a) imported into Hong Kong, and (b) produced respectively by CSD and local private enterprises;

(3) of the criteria currently adopted by the Government for determining the quantity of face masks effective in filtering viruses to be maintained in stock by the Government for internal use, and how many months' consumption that such quantity of face masks can meet;

(4) of the respective quantities of face masks that various government departments have (i) obtained from the Government Logistics Department, (ii) consumed, and (iii) stockpiled, since January this year; the respective projected quantities of face masks to be allocated to the various departments in the coming month;

(5) of the circumstances under which the Government will consider (i) distributing face masks free of charge to members of the public and those organisations in need (e.g. elderly centres or social welfare organisations), and (ii) amending the Reserved Commodities Ordinance (Cap. 296) to specify

face masks as a reserved commodity, so as to stabilise the supply of face masks;

(6) of the number of quarantine residential units which will be needed in the coming three months, as projected by the Government; whether the Government has (i) discussed with the Central People's Government on borrowing parts of the barracks of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Hong Kong Garrison for use as isolation/quarantine facilities, and (ii) studied the construction of isolation/quarantine facilities on the site reserved for the Phase 2 development of the Hong Kong Disneyland; if so, of the details (including the costs and the commencement dates for works);

(7) given that although the Mainland authorities suspended on February 2 and 7 this year respectively the processing of applications by Mainland residents for travel endorsements and for business visit endorsements to visit Hong Kong, they will still approve applications for visiting Hong Kong with urgent purposes such as studying, seeking medical treatment and attending funerals, of (i) the weekly number of Mainland residents entering Hong Kong during the period from January 1 to February 1, this year, and (ii) the weekly number of Mainland residents entering Hong Kong since February 2, this year (with a tabulated breakdown by type of endorsements and specific reasons for visiting Hong Kong (e.g. seeking medical treatment and attending funeral)); and

(8) as the number of confirmed cases of the infection recorded in the Guangdong Province has been on the rise recently, whether the Government will consider further tightening the immigration arrangements to temporarily suspend the entry of all Mainlanders to Hong Kong; if not, of the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In view of the serious outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), it is the top priority of the Government and members of the community to step up our efforts in prevention and control of the disease. Since the outbreak, the Government has been adhering to the three key principles of "responding promptly", "staying alert to the situation" and "working in an open and transparent manner". Based on science and experts' advice, we have continued to adopt the "containment" strategy and secured every line of defence with a view to achieving "early identification, early isolation and early treatment of the infected". The Government has introduced a host of specific and practicable measures in the areas of providing surgical masks and protective equipment, compulsory quarantine and reducing cross-boundary flow of people, etc.

In consultation with the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau, Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau, Security Bureau, Home Affairs Bureau, Labour and Welfare Bureau and Hospital Authority (HA), my reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Wu Chi-wai is as follows:

(1) and (2) In view of the latest development of the COVID-19 outbreak, both the Government and the market have been actively procuring masks globally and importing them from different places and through different channels into Hong Kong. The commodity classification list currently used for trade declarations is based on the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System commonly adopted by the international community. There is no separate classification in the list for face masks or masks which can meet certain specific requirements. As such, no official statistics on weekly imports, exports, re-exports and net imports are available in this regard. However, the Government estimates that, through Hongkong Post's services alone, over 160 000 postal items containing masks have been delivered between the end of Lunar New Year and March 6. As senders are not required to declare the detailed quantity of contents in their postal items, the Government does not have the actual number of masks imported through this channel. The Government expects that local demand for masks will remain keen in the near future. The volume of mask imports into Hong Kong is expected to remain high, but it is also subject to global supply, the latest demand of other places for masks, as well as export control imposed by certain countries and regions for such items.

As regards local production, as the Hong Kong manufacturing industry is not required to submit figures on its production output to the Government, we do not possess statistics on mask production by private enterprises. Under the Anti-epidemic Fund, the Government has launched the Local Mask Production Subsidy Scheme to facilitate the establishment of mask production lines in Hong Kong. The Subsidy Scheme will provide financial assistance to a maximum of 20 production lines, with each producing at least 500 000 masks per month. The Government will also procure up to 2 million masks from each production line each month for one year. Actual mask output under the Subsidy Scheme depends on the number of production lines, the timing they commence production, and their respective production capacities.

In 2019, the Correctional Services Department (CSD) produced about 1.1 million filter masks per month on average, which were mainly supplied to the Government Logistics Department (GLD). As the outbreak of novel coronavirus, there is a rapid increase for demand of filter masks from government departments. As such, the mask production facilities in Lo Wu Correctional Institution gradually increased production since January 2020 and has reached 24-hour operation. CSD has also recruited over 1 200 off-duty or retired CSD officers as volunteers to participate in the production of masks, increasing the production to 2.5 million masks per month. Among them, 1.8 million masks are supplied to GLD, whereas the remaining 700 000 masks are set aside for distribution to cleansing workers engaged by outsourced cleaning service contractors through relevant departments (including the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, Leisure and Cultural Services Department, Housing Department, Government Property Agency, Marine Department and Customs and Excise Department (in respect of the Shenzhen Bay Port Hong Kong Port Area)).

CSD is actively striving to increase the number of production lines so as to further increase the mask production as early as possible.

(3) In support of the Government's response plan for infectious diseases, GLD maintains a stock of 10 million masks to support the operational needs of relevant bureaux and departments. With the development of the outbreak, the usage of masks by government departments has significantly increased. Based on broad estimates, the current stock of masks kept by GLD can last for about two months for meeting the operational needs of government departments.

The HA has established guidelines on the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) for medical procedures and workplaces of different risk levels with stringent infection control measures and training, allowing frontline healthcare staff of various positions to understand and get familiar with infection control measures required for different medical procedures, including on the use of suitable PPE. Based on HA's usage as of March 13, the stockpile of surgical mask in HA is adequate for about two months' consumption, while stockpile of N95 respirators is adequate for about one month's consumption. In view of the pandemic, HA expects the demand for PPE will continue to increase in the coming months. The HA will continue to monitor the situation and endeavour to expedite the procurement of PPE so as to ensure that adequate PPE is provided to frontline healthcare staff for patient care.

(4) All government departments have stepped up efforts to reduce their demand for masks. The masks are now predominantly used for discharge of duties related to preventing and controlling the outbreak, as well as essential and emergency services provided by other government departments. In light of the development of the outbreak, GLD will comply strictly with the Government's internal guidelines on distribution and accord priority to frontline staff participating in quarantine-related work and execution of quarantine orders, including medical and port health staff of the Department of Health, and those who maintain provision of essential public services.

(5) The Government has provided 1 million masks for the staff of subvented, contract, self-financing and private residential service units (including residential care homes for the elderly and residential care homes for persons with disabilities licensed by the Social Welfare Department) so as to assist them to provide continuous services. Also, the Government has received donations of masks and sanitising items from some groups and individuals for distribution to those in need. According to the wishes of donors, the Government will distribute these items to day care service units, high-risk patients (e.g. the elderly and pregnant women) and medical workers through HA, as well as elderly and needy households through the major charities and non-governmental organisations.

As the supply of masks continues to be tight in the short run, the Government considers that it is more pragmatic and practicable to strive to increase the supply and manage the demand. The Government currently does not have any plans to mandatorily control the supply and prices of masks through legislation, because this could be counterproductive and possibly adversely affect supply, or lower our ability to procure masks from other places. To address the problem at source, we will continue to increase supply and appeal

for donation of masks to those in need through various channels in order to meet the needs of society and address the problem of inadequate supply.

(6) Currently, there are three quarantine centres for close contacts who may have been exposed to the risk of contracting COVID-19 but are nonetheless asymptomatic, namely the Lei Yue Mun Park and Holiday Village in Chai Wan, the Heritage Lodge at the Jao Tsung-I Academy and Chun Yeung Estate, Fo Tan, providing about 1 250 units. We are also making preparations to make available more units in Chun Yeung Estate for quarantine purpose. It is expected that an addition of nearly 400 units will be available soon.

In view of the development of the outbreak, the Government has been actively looking for suitable sites and setting up more quarantine facilities as soon as possible since late January. It is estimated that 88 retrofitted units at the Junior Police Call Permanent Activity Centre (JPC Centre) at Pat Heung, Yuen Long can be put into use shortly. On the other hand, quarantine facilities are being constructed through the application of the modular integrated construction method at the Lei Yue Mun Park and Holiday Village in Chai Wan, the Sai Kung Outdoor Recreation Centre, the JPC Centre and a government site at Penny's Bay, providing at least 1 000 units as quarantine facilities in total. It is expected that the units can be completed and put into use from March to July by phase. In addition, we are following up with the Walt Disney Company, which has agreed to explore using another site at Penny's Bay reserved for future tourism development for constructing quarantine facilities. As regards the barracks of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Hong Kong Garrison, they are used for defence purposes, and the HKSAR Government has no plan to seek any change.

In view of the rapid development of the COVID-19 outbreak, it is difficult to accurately estimate the demand for quarantine facilities. The Government will closely monitor the latest development and make corresponding deployment in view of the situation.

(7) The weekly numbers of arrivals of Mainland visitors from January 1 to February 1, 2020 are tabulated below:

Date (Monday to Sunday)	Number of arrivals of Mainland visitors
January 1 – 5 (5 days in total)	414 291
January 6 – 12	693 689
January 13 – 19	788 072
January 20 – 26	506 607
January 27 – February 1 (6 days in total)	129 711

The weekly numbers of arrivals of Mainland visitors with breakdown by type of endorsements / travel documents from February 2 to March 10, 2020 are

tabulated below:

Date (Mon to Sun)	Number of arrivals of Mainland visitors	By type of Endorsements and Other Travel Documents						
		Endorsement for Individual Visit	Endorsement for Group Visit	Endorsement for Business Visit	Endorsement for Visiting Relatives	Other Endorsement	Chinese Passport	Other Travel Documents
Feb 2	11 715	2 223	208	476	1 975	320	6 367	146
Feb 3 – 9	57 438	4 451	874	2 895	9 355	2 135	36 916	812
Feb 10 – 16	5 273	5 (Note 1)	0	3 (Note 2)	832	29	4 368	36
Feb 17 – 23	4 443	1 (Note 3)	0	0	964	30	3 392	56
Feb 24 – Mar 1	5 423	0	0	2 (Note 4)	1 396	28	3 905	92
Mar 2 – 8	6 853	1 (Note 5)	0	7 (Note 6)	1 805	25	4 741	274
Mar 9 – 10 (2 days in total)	1 861	0	0	1 (Note 7)	496	9	1 308	47

Note 1: Including one Mainland visitor arriving from Macao via the control point at the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge Hong Kong Port, and four Mainland private air crew members arriving from the Mainland and disembarking at the Hong Kong International Airport who were exempted from the 14-day compulsory quarantine arrangement.

Note 2: Including two Mainland visitors arriving from Macao via the control point at the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge Hong Kong Port and one Mainland visitor arriving from abroad via the Hong Kong International Airport.

Note 3: Including one Mainland private air crew member arriving from the Mainland and disembarking at the Hong Kong International Airport who was exempted from the 14-day compulsory quarantine arrangement.

Note 4: Including two Mainland visitors arriving from Macao via the control point at the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge Hong Kong Port.

Note 5: Including one Mainland visitor arriving from Macao via the control point at the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge Hong Kong Port.

Note 6: Including three Mainland visitors arriving from Macao via the control point at the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge Hong Kong Port, and four Mainland private air crew members arriving from the Mainland and disembarking at Hong Kong International Airport who were exempted from the 14-day compulsory quarantine arrangement.

Note 7: Including one Mainland visitor arriving from Macao via the control point at the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge Hong Kong Port.

The Immigration Department (ImmD) does not maintain other breakdown

statistics mentioned in the question.

(8) Since late January, the Government has actively implemented various measures to reduce the flow of people between the Mainland and Hong Kong in the light of the latest situation. The effect of these measures is remarkable. These measures include –

(a) With effect from midnight of January 27, non-Hong Kong residents from Hubei Province and persons who visited the Hubei Province in the past 14 days are not be permitted to enter Hong Kong until further notice. As at March 15, the ImmD had refused entry of over 2 412 visitors concerned at various control points;

(b) With effect from midnight of January 30, the passenger clearance services of six control points (namely the West Kowloon Station, Hung Hom Station, China Ferry Terminal, Tuen Mun Ferry Terminal, Sha Tau Kok and Man Kam To) were suspended until further notice;

(c) With effect from midnight of February 4, the passenger clearance services of four control points (namely Lo Wu, Lok Ma Chau Spur Line, Lok Ma Chau (Huanggang) and Hong Kong-Macau Ferry Terminal) were suspended until further notice;

(d) With immediate effect on February 5, the passenger clearance services of Kai Tak Cruise Terminal and the Ocean Terminal were suspended until further notice. The 10 control points which were suspended since January 30 and February 4 remain closed. The passenger clearances services are maintained only at the Airport, Shenzhen Bay Control Point and Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge Hong Kong Port;

(e) With effect from February 8, apart from exempted persons, the Department of Health (DH) issues quarantine orders to all people entering Hong Kong from the Mainland or those who have been to the Mainland in the past 14 days preceding arrival at Hong Kong (including Hong Kong residents, Mainland residents and visitors from other places). As the period of compulsory quarantine would be 14-day, arrivals holding a visa with validity of less than 14 days would be denied entry; and

(f) In the light of the latest development of the novel coronavirus infection, DH has progressively, from late February onwards, issued quarantine orders to people who have been to the affected areas (including Korea, Iran, Schengen Area and Hokkaido of Japan) in the past 14 days preceding arrival at Hong Kong. From midnight of March 19, DH will issue quarantine orders to people who have been to the United Kingdom, the United States, Ireland and Egypt in the past 14 days preceding arrival at Hong Kong. As the period of compulsory quarantine would be 14-day, arrivals holding a visa with validity of less than 14 days would be denied entry.

In addition, since January 28, the National Immigration Administration (NIA) has suspended the application, approval and issuance of the group visit endorsements and the endorsements under the Individual Visit Scheme

(including the "one trip per week" endorsements) for Mainland residents to travel to Hong Kong and Macao with immediate effect until further notice. In view of the HKSAR Government's imposition of the mandatory quarantine on people entering Hong Kong from the Mainland, the NIA also suspended the processing of the business visit endorsements for Mainland residents to travel to Hong Kong with effect from February 7.

From the passenger traffic figures, the number of daily passenger trips arriving Hong Kong was about 19 503 on average from February 8, 2020 (i.e. from which the measure for issuing quarantine orders to all people entering Hong Kong from the Mainland or those who have been to the Mainland in the past 14 days preceding arrival at Hong Kong has taken effect) to March 15, 2020, which has significantly reduced by 91 per cent in comparison with the figures prior to the implementation of the measures for managing control points and reducing the flow of people (i.e. 217 065 passenger trips on January 26). Among them, about 82 per cent were Hong Kong residents (16 045 passenger trips daily on average), whereas five per cent were Mainland residents (895 passenger trips daily on average). The HKSAR Government will continue to monitor the latest situation and make necessary adjustment having regard to the advice of the experts as well as the actual situation in Hong Kong.