

LCQ17: Compulsory quarantine at home

Following is a question by the Hon Kenneth Leung and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (April 29):

Question:

To tackle the Coronavirus Disease 2019 pandemic, persons arriving in Hong Kong on all flights are currently required to provide their deep throat saliva samples to the authorities for conducting tests for coronavirus, and then undergo a 14-day compulsory quarantine at a designated place (home or other accommodation) pursuant to the requirements of the quarantine orders. Some members of the public have pointed out that while such persons are forbidden to go out during home quarantine, those living with them are not subject to this restriction, giving rise to the possibility of the virus spreading to the community through the latter. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether the four members of the expert advisory panel (panel) commissioned by the Chief Executive unanimously agreed to the arrangement that persons living with those under home quarantine are not required to subject to compulsory quarantine; if so, of the panel's justifications, and whether the panel had pointed out the inadequacies of this arrangement; if so, of the details and the remedial measures; and

(2) given that as at March 24, this year, the Department of Health issued a total of 408 warning letters to persons who had violated the quarantine orders, whether the Government will consider stepping up law enforcement efforts to enhance the deterrent effect; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons and the alternative options for that?

Reply:

President,

With the Government putting in place and continuing to implement a series of stringent prevention and control measures, as well as the dedication of healthcare staff and frontline workers and co-operation of members of the public, there are preliminary signs that the coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) outbreak situation in Hong Kong is stabilising. That said, in view that the situation of the outbreak is still dire around the globe, the Government will continue to put in efforts to prevent the virus from being imported from outside Hong Kong and imported cases from spreading locally. The Government continues to adopt the "containment" strategy, including strengthening virus surveillance for travellers arriving at Hong Kong, mandating all inbound travellers (except for a small number of exempted persons) to be subject to compulsory quarantine, as well as enhancing monitoring and enforcement for people placed under quarantine. Also, using a

science-based approach and built on advice from the expert advisory panel, the Government plans and coordinates efforts on prevention and control of the epidemic and formulates suitable strategies and response measures.

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Kenneth Leung is as follows:

(1) The Government reports various prevention and control measures to the expert advisory panel regularly and seek their opinions, including on the compulsory quarantine requirement for Hong Kong residents arriving at Hong Kong who have been to any overseas countries or areas in the past 14 days. The expert advisory panel agreed with the arrangement that asymptomatic inbound travellers should be subject to compulsory quarantine at designated places (home or other accommodation). It considered that people living with these persons under quarantine should be required to follow a series of prevention measures, such as maintaining good personal hygiene, wearing a surgical mask, checking body temperature and maintaining social distance with the persons under quarantine, but did not bring up the requirement for the people living with these persons under quarantine to undergo compulsory quarantine.

(2) According to the Compulsory Quarantine of Certain Persons Arriving at Hong Kong Regulation (Cap. 599C), starting from February 8, 2020, except for exempted persons, all persons having stayed in the Mainland for any period during the 14 days preceding arrival in Hong Kong will be subject to compulsory quarantine for 14 days, regardless of nationality and travel documents used. Since March 25, 2020, the compulsory 14-day quarantine arrangement has been extended to all persons arriving from or having stayed in Macao and Taiwan in the past 14 days prior to arrival in Hong Kong, in addition to those arriving from the Mainland. Furthermore, according to the Compulsory Quarantine of Persons Arriving at Hong Kong from Foreign Places Regulation (Cap. 599E), starting from March 19, 2020, except for exempted persons, all persons arriving at Hong Kong from places outside China will be subject to compulsory quarantine for 14 days.

In accordance with the requirements under Section 8 of Cap. 599C and Cap. 599E, a person placed under quarantine in accordance with Section 3 must not leave the place of quarantine if the relevant person has not been given permission by an authorised officer. The Government has implemented various measures to monitor whether persons placed under quarantine abide by the law, including conducting surprise checks, placing calls to the relevant persons, sharing of real-time location via communication software and using electronic wristbands/monitoring wristbands paired with mobile app, with a view to ensuring that the persons placed under quarantine are staying at their dwelling places.

Implementing compulsory quarantine arrangement is a crucial element of the measures for the prevention and control of the epidemic. The relevant departments have strengthened monitoring and inspections. As at April 27, 2020, officers from disciplinary forces had conducted surprise visits on over 14 000 persons under quarantine. The call centre of the DH had placed over

190 000 telephone calls to persons under quarantine to conduct surprise checks. The relevant departments had also distributed over 75 000 electronic wristbands/ monitoring wristbands, shared real-time location via communication software with over 80 000 persons under compulsory quarantine, and made about 180 000 calls (including video calls) to ensure that persons under quarantine are staying at their dwelling places.

During the monitoring process, if abnormal situations are observed or persons who have breached the quarantine order are found, the relevant departments will suitably follow up. The Government adopts a "zero tolerance" policy towards those who violate the quarantine order, and they are subject to immediate prosecution without warning starting from March 22, 2020. Offenders are subject to a maximum fine of \$25,000 and imprisonment for six months. As at April 27, 2020, four individuals who violated quarantine orders were respectively sentenced to imprisonment ranging from 10 days to three months by magistrates' courts. Besides, a total of 56 individuals left their dwelling places before expiry of the quarantine orders without reasonable explanation and permission given by an authorised officer, and were stopped by staff of the Immigration Department at border control points. The DH and Police will continue investigations on the cases concerned and gather more evidence for consideration by the Department of Justice for making prosecutions.