

LCQ5: Impacts of novel coronavirus epidemic on Hong Kong

Following is a question by the Hon Charles Mok and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (March 18):

Question:

The novel coronavirus epidemic has now spread to more than 110 countries and territories around the world and has been described as a pandemic by the World Health Organization. In recent days, a number of persons from the Mainland, who had been confirmed to have been infected with the virus, withheld the information of having visited the Mainland when seeking medical treatment, withheld the relevant circumstances when making health declarations, or refused to cooperate with the authorities. Some members of the public have relayed to me that they are gravely worried that the Government's failure to "completely close all boundary control points" will lead to a rise in locally infected cases, thereby imposing an unbearable burden on Hong Kong's public healthcare system. Regarding the impacts of the epidemic on Hong Kong, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) among the non-local persons who had entered Hong Kong from the Mainland and had been confirmed in Hong Kong to have been infected with the virus, of the number of those who successfully gained entry into Hong Kong as they had not been identified as suspected cases, as well as the respective average duration of their stay in Hong Kong at the time they showed the relevant symptoms and they were confirmed to have been infected; whether it will immediately suspend granting entry permission to all non-local persons who have recently visited any Mainland cities or come to Hong Kong via the Mainland, and temporarily forbid Hong Kong residents from travelling to the Mainland, until the epidemic is under control; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) given that there are countries (including Italy and Kuwait), one after another, banning flights to and from Hong Kong or entry of Hong Kong residents, how the Government convinces the international community that the epidemic will not be spread to other places by people coming from Hong Kong or by Hong Kong residents; and

(3) given that some elderly persons, grass-roots families and the disadvantaged groups are unable to acquire face masks at a reasonable price, whether the Government will allocate funding from the Community Care Fund for purchasing face masks, and sell those face masks to Hong Kong residents in need at a low price at designated locations; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared on March 11 that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak can be described as a pandemic. Faced with the outbreak situation rapidly evolving and a continuous surge in the number of affected countries/regions and confirmed cases, the Government is closely monitoring the situation around the world and implementing relevant response measures.

After consulting and consolidating information provided by the Security Bureau, Transport and Housing Bureau, Labour and Welfare Bureau, Home Affairs Bureau, Commerce and Economic Development Bureau, Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau and Information Services Department (ISD), my reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Charles Mok is as follows:

(1) The Government has been closely monitoring the development of the COVID-19 outbreak in the Mainland. As at March 16, among the 157 confirmed cases and one suspected case received by the Department of Health's (DH) Centre for Health Protection (CHP), seven are non-Hong Kong residents entering Hong Kong via the Mainland, six of whom had stayed in Hong Kong for one to six days before the onset of fever symptoms. Since February 7, there has been no imported case from the Mainland.

Having regard to the seriousness of the outbreak, starting from January 27, all non-Hong Kong residents who had visited Hubei Province in the past 14 days prior to arrival to Hong Kong are not permitted to enter into Hong Kong. Starting from February 8, in accordance with the Compulsory Quarantine of Certain Persons Arriving at Hong Kong Regulation (Cap 599C) (the Regulation), DH requires all persons who have been to the Mainland in the past 14 days preceding arrival in Hong Kong (save for exempted persons), regardless of their nationality and travel documents, to stay at designated places (quarantine centre, home or other accommodation) for a 14-day compulsory quarantine. A breach of the above quarantine requirement is an offence. Offenders are liable to a penalty of a fine of \$25,000 and imprisonment for six months. Also, providing false or misleading information to health officers or medical practitioners concerned would be liable to a penalty of a fine of \$10,000 and imprisonment for six months. As of now, no person who underwent compulsory quarantine had become confirmed cases during the quarantine period.

In fact, in view of the outbreak situation, the Government has taken a number of measures proactively since late January to further reduce the flow of people between the Mainland and Hong Kong. These initiatives have been very effective. During the period from February 8 (i.e. when quarantine order to all people entering Hong Kong from the Mainland or have visited the Mainland in the past 14 days came into effect) to March 15, compared to the figure before the measures to strictly manage control points and reduce the cross-boundary flow of people came into effect, the daily average passenger trips arriving in Hong Kong had dropped significantly by over 90 per cent, with Hong Kong residents making up over 80 per cent of the total passenger

trips and Mainland residents five per cent. Compared to the figure before the measures came into effect, daily average passengers trips arriving in Hong Kong via the two land border control points had dropped over 95 per cent, with Hong Kong residents making up nearly 85 per cent of the total passenger trips and Mainland residents three per cent. However, due to the close economic, social and livelihood ties between Hong Kong and the Mainland and the heavy visitor traffic, a complete closure of the boundary control points is not practicable and may also affect the supply of daily necessities and food to Hong Kong. Starting from February 4, the Government has only maintained services at the two land boundary control points of Shenzhen Bay Port and Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge Hong Kong Port. With this measure coupled with the implementation of mandatory quarantine under the Regulation since February 8, it is believed that the flow of people can be minimised and the risk of disease transmission reduced.

The Government has conducted detailed risk assessments for formulating prevention and control measures in response to disease outbreak in other countries/regions. Other than considering the number, distribution and rate of increase of infected persons, the Government would also take into account the surveillance and control measures implemented by the authorities of that particular country/region, as well as the frequency of travels between Hong Kong and that particular country/region. The Government would suitably review and rationalise the relevant measures having regard to the latest development of the outbreak. Furthermore, the Government has also urged members of the public planning to travel outside Hong Kong to adjust travel plans and avoid non-essential travel. As the outbreak situation around the world is evolving rapidly, members of the public are strongly urged to avoid non-essential travel outside Hong Kong.

(2) The Government is aware that some countries/regions have decided to suspend air services to/from Hong Kong or prohibit the entry of travellers from Hong Kong or those who have visited Hong Kong recently in view of the development of COVID-19. After learning of the decisions of the relevant countries/regions, the Government has been actively following up with the civil aviation authorities and relevant units of the countries/regions concerned and explaining in detail the prevention measures implemented by the Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA). For instance, when Italy announced the suspension of air services between Italy and Hong Kong on January 31, the Government immediately followed up with the Italian Civil Aviation Authority. We were informed by the Italian authority in the early morning of February 2 (Hong Kong time) that the relevant suspension of cargo flights had been lifted. In addition, when Vietnam announced the immediate suspension of air services between Vietnam and Hong Kong on February 1, the Government actively liaised with the Vietnamese Civil Aviation Authority. The Vietnamese Civil Aviation Authority lifted the relevant suspension with immediate effect at night on the same day. The Government will continue actively follow up with other relevant countries/regions, so as to minimise the impact of COVID-19 on Hong Kong's aviation services.

Also, the Government has earlier written to Consuls General of various countries in Hong Kong and held briefings to explain in detail the overall

strategy and measures put in place by the Government to combat the outbreak, and to reiterate that extreme measures such as the suspension of air services to/from Hong Kong or restricting the entry of travellers from Hong Kong would be unnecessary at this stage. The Airport Authority Hong Kong also arranged on February 7 a briefing-cum-visit to HKIA for Consuls General in Hong Kong to explain in detail the robust anti-epidemic measures at HKIA. Furthermore, ISD issues press releases to local and overseas media on a daily basis to explain the latest situation in Hong Kong and our anti-epidemic measures. The ISD has also been providing daily reports to Consular Corps, international chambers of commerce and other organisations with international connections since January 26.

(3) As regards mask supply, the Government understands that some members of the public have difficulty in procuring masks. We are also very concerned about the demand for masks by the elderly, grassroots families and the underprivileged. In view that the supply of masks and personal protection equipment is tight globally and the announcement by WHO that the outbreak is a pandemic, panic buying happens in many places. The Government has been adopting a multi-pronged approach to procure masks globally through different channels and means. These include the Government Logistics Department reaching out to suppliers directly and through referrals from Overseas Economic and Trade Offices and individuals to source supplies for direct procurement of masks and anti-epidemic items without undergoing any tendering procedures. The aim is to secure the delivery of these resources to Hong Kong in the shortest time possible.

In addition to imports, the Government has taken steps to follow up on the recommendation to increase local production. Under the Anti-epidemic Fund, the Local Mask Production Subsidy Scheme will provide financial assistance to facilitate the establishment of mask production lines in Hong Kong. The Correctional Services Department has also increased its mask production volume. As for retail, the Government has been in liaison with retailers and suppliers at all levels. It is hoped that when stock is available, it can be handled without causing too much inconvenience to members of the public.

Lastly, the Government has provided one 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 Social Welfare Department, so as to assist them to continue to provide services. The Government has also received donations of masks and sanitising items from some groups and individuals for distribution to those in need. We will help the donors distribute the donated items in accordance with their wishes, including providing masks to high-risk patients and medical workers through the Hospital Authority, as well as to the elderly and needy households through major charities and non-government organisations. At the same time, the Government encourages private and charitable organisations to donate masks to the underprivileged, and stands ready to play a facilitation role with financial resources and co-ordination.

Thank you, Mr President.