

Second batch of officers of HKSAR Government fly to Japan for taking back Hong Kong residents on board the Diamond Princess cruise (with photos)

The second batch of 36 officers of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government participating in the operation for taking back the Hong Kong residents on board the Diamond Princess cruise to Hong Kong flew to Tokyo, Japan bringing with them the necessary protective gears yesterday afternoon (February 18). They joined the advance team led by the Under Secretary for Security, Mr Sonny Au, and the Director of Immigration, Mr Erick Tsang, with 30 officers arriving Tokyo on February 17 to get prepared for today's operation for taking back the affected Hong Kong residents to Hong Kong by free chartered flights.

The HKSAR Government attaches great importance to this operation. It is personally led by Mr Tsang, with support of 50 officers from the Immigration Department (ImmD). A total of eight medical and nursing professionals from the Department of Health (DH) and the Hospital Authority (HA) would also participate in the entire operation to ensure that the operation goes smoothly and the health needs of the Hong Kong residents are being well taken care of during the journey.

The advance team held a meeting with the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in Tokyo (Tokyo ETO) yesterday morning, and they met with the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Japan in the afternoon to discuss collaboration for this operation. Thereafter, the HKSAR Government also met with the cruise operator and the representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan to learn more about the arrangements and schedules of the disembarkation of the passengers. They also made concrete demands to the Japanese authority, including seeking early confirmation as to whether the Hong Kong residents tested negative for the virus could be released as a whole group on February 19, and the list of Hong Kong residents who are close contacts of the confirmed cases thereby subject to extended quarantine period and their quarantine dates and arrangements. In the event that the concerned Hong Kong residents cannot leave as a whole group on February 19, we have requested the Japanese authority to prioritise those who have opted to take the chartered flight back to Hong Kong for disembarkation on February 19.

Mr Tsang as the commander of this operation said, "Colleagues of ImmD together with Tokyo ETO, DH and HA have got prepared, and the two chartered flights arranged by the HKSAR Government would be ready today. However, up till now, there are still many uncertainties on the arrangements of the Japanese side, including whether the Japanese authority can have the results of the virus tests for all passengers ready by today as planned, and whether the Hong Kong residents on board are permitted to disembark as a whole group on February 19. We have made our demands to the Japanese authority and

pending their response. In the meantime, we are preparing for different possible scenarios. We will make our best effort to take back the affected Hong Kong residents to Hong Kong as early as possible and provide support to those who cannot leave for the time being. In all circumstances, we will do our best to take care of the Hong Kong residents who are permitted to disembark; and for those who are subject to quarantine for further periods or have to stay in Japan for medical treatment, I will arrange officers of ImmD to stay behind to provide them with any assistance as practicable."

As of February 18, a total of 542 passengers on board the Diamond Princess cruise docking in Yokohama, Japan have been confirmed infection with the novel coronavirus. There are 352 Hong Kong residents on board, including 260 holding a HKSAR passport and 92 holding a foreign passport, among them there are about 50 confirmed cases of infection with the novel coronavirus.

Although the Japanese Government has already placed all passengers under quarantine on board the Diamond Princess cruise for 14 days as from February 5, as new confirmed cases of novel coronavirus continue to emerge on board, the DH of the HKSAR Government will have to subject the passengers on board to a 14-day compulsory quarantine at a quarantine centre immediately upon their return to Hong Kong in accordance with the Prevention and Control of Disease Regulation (Cap. 599A). This is an imperative for safeguarding the health of the passengers concerned and the health of their families and for preventing and controlling the spread of the epidemic. This arrangement has been endorsed by the members of the Expert Advisory Group to the Chief Executive (including Professor Gabriel Leung; Professor Yuen Kwok-yung; Professor David Hui Shu-cheong and Professor Keiji Fukuda). According to the professional advice of the experts, the virus remains very active on board and it is prudent for the returning passengers to stay at the quarantine centre upon their return to Hong Kong in order to minimise the health risks to their families and the community.

Upon arrival in Hong Kong, transportation will be arranged to transfer the passengers from Hong Kong International Airport to the quarantine centre. For any individual who does not take the chartered flight to Hong Kong, the person will be referred to the Port Health Division for assessment as soon as returning to Hong Kong. The person may be subject to a maximum of 14 days' quarantine in a designated quarantine centre depending on the situation.

