

Transcript of remarks by CE at media session

Following is the transcript of remarks by the Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, at a media session this afternoon (February 18):

Reporter: Mrs Lam. You said last week that you couldn't see a need to postpone the CE (Chief Executive) Election. Could you explain why you've changed your stance? Was it because of President Xi's comment that controlling the pandemic was the Government's top priority? And secondly, is there any chance that the Government may have to further postpone the election if the virus situation remains severe in early May? And are you optimistic that the new CE will be able to come into office as scheduled on July 1? And is extending the current term of the administration one of the options? And also, do you intend to run for the CE Election? And lastly about the news about city-wide testing or lockdown, how likely do you think the Government will carry out city-wide testing or lock down the whole city, and if a full-scale lockdown is needed, how long do you expect that to be and how would that be executed? Thank you.

Chief Executive: Again, three questions. First of all, when you said that I have changed my stance, I want to remind myself what I have said on previous occasions. Actually the media have been asking me this question on several occasions and on almost every occasion, I said "at the present moment", because the epidemic situation is changing so rapidly, nobody could give any absolute guarantee about what will happen the next day and the next day and so on. If I refer you to an answer in English – it was a stand-up on February 15 – a similar question was asked by a reporter. I said, "At this moment, the plan for the Chief Executive Election remains the same. That is, the nomination period will start on February 20 and the voting day will be on March 27. As I just said, one of the things I need to clarify is because of the severity and the speed of this latest wave of the epidemic, we have to continuously review the situation, adjust the measures and seek additional help, so I could not preclude any possibilities at this moment." I hope you remember what I have said. I will not accept that this is a change in my stance. This is a fulfilment of my promise that I will continuously review the situation and adjust the measures or the policy that need to be taken in the best interests of Hong Kong. Invoking the Emergency Regulations Ordinance is not an easy decision but it is one under the present circumstances that serves the overall public interest of Hong Kong.

The second question is a very valid one because, again, I don't have a crystal ball. I could not guarantee that by early April when the nomination period starts again that we would not have COVID-19 cases in Hong Kong. But we still have about six weeks to fight this epidemic, and with the full support of the Central People's Government, and you are seeing the support coming almost every day, and the tougher measures or more decisive measures that the HKSAR Government will take because of this additional timely support

from the Central People's Government, I remain optimistic and I appeal to the people of Hong Kong to remain optimistic and confident that we will be able to overcome this public health crisis in the same way as we have overcome the previous crises, whether it is this COVID-19 epidemic or the riots that we saw in the latter part of 2019.

But what will happen if somehow, by April, we are still facing a situation as serious as today, and similarly, the judgement is that it would not be safe to start a CE Election? Then, of course, one option is to do another postponement. We still have a little bit of time to postpone it again with the 14 days and the 21 days. But that will take us very close to the end of June, which means that it will heavily compromise the second factor, which is to allow sufficient time for the CE-elect to form his or her team and to complete the necessary work before he or she takes office on July 1. It will be a very difficult decision by then.

But that's all we could do, because the current-term Government could not do anything that goes beyond our term. Options like extending the term of the Chief Executive or postponing the CE Election until after June 30 are not the decisions that we could take. They could only be made by the Central People's Government, and I believe that since the Central People's Government is supportive of our current decision, when the time comes then the Central People's Government will sort of take over and find a solution to the problem then.

The third question is about the next stage of managing or fighting this COVID-19 epidemic. I just mentioned that with the full support and additional help from the Central People's Government, we will be undertaking more tough measures. One of the measures that we are planning, and planning very seriously, is mandatory universal testing. We will test everyone in Hong Kong. But mandatory testing and a complete city lockdown may not need to go hand in hand, it depends on the actual situation. In our case, having examined the unique situation in Hong Kong, we probably will just go for universal testing of everyone, but testing more times, which I understand was the method used by Macao, for example. Macao tested their 600 000 residents not only once but twice; or sometimes, other cities in the Mainland even three times in order to ensure that we will eliminate any remaining infections in society. That is something that we are planning, but a complete city lockdown is something we are not planning, so I need not answer your other questions about how long and what to do and so on. Thank you.

(Please also refer to the Chinese portion of the transcript.)