

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 22):

Reporter: How's the universal testing different from the Mainland style? Why a lockdown, which was reported to be suggested by the Beijing Government, was not implemented? Is there any estimation that how many positive cases could be identified through CUT (Compulsory Universal Testing)? Many isolation facilities will be completed in the coming few months. How can you ensure that they are enough for cases identified from CUT which will start next month? You have also mentioned earlier that this wave will be contained in two to three months. Do you have a more, like, pessimistic forecast now? And also, like, how can the Government ensure residents confined by CUT would have enough assistance? Will there be compensation offered to the business sector affected by the testing and also, will the residents' mobility be restricted during the CUT is being carried out? If yes, then what's the alternative on that?

Chief Executive: There's a whole range of issues, I try my best to answer. I hope you understand, I want to clarify that I have not used descriptions like "I'm guaranteeing that this will happen", "the fifth wave will be contained" and "I will ensure that this will happen and that will not happen". It is not possible. This is an unprecedented challenge and nobody could predict the development of this fifth wave of the COVID-19 epidemic. I met with my six experts this morning including Professor KY Yuen, Professor Gabriel Leung, Professor Lau Yu-lung, Professor David Hui, Ivan Hung and CS Lau – six distinguished professors specialising in different aspects of public health and medicine. They gave me not entirely the same advice, exactly because nobody could predict. So I could not answer your question whether this wave will definitely be contained within two to three months. What I have told you is we hope to make the full use of the next two or three months because this is critical. We probably have not seen the peak of this wave, so how we are going to manage the next two to three months will be extremely essential and critical to containing but there is no guarantee whatsoever.

And as far as the Compulsory Universal Testing which we intend to do is concerned, there is no instruction from the Central People's Government on a lockdown, so I cannot comment on your very speculative remark that Beijing has imposed an instruction of a lockdown. I have explained that we are shouldering the primary responsibility for combating the COVID-19 epidemic. The country, our motherland, is giving us all the support that we need at this critical stage. But at the end of the day, I am responsible under "One Country, Two Systems". This is entirely a matter for the Hong Kong SAR Administration to tackle. But the Central People's Government has given us all the support that we have asked for and I am sure we will continue to ask for more support in terms of medical supplies or personnel or testing

equipment and so on.

Again, I could not predict or forecast the percentage of positive cases arising from a universal testing. But to give you a feel is that, nowadays when we did the RTD, that is the "restriction-testing declaration" we started off at the beginning of this month, the percentage of discovery, so to speak about positive cases, was 0.5 per cent, but more recently, it has risen to 2 per cent. And in two extreme cases, it was even 7 point something per cent, so that's very worrying. But of course that is not a representative sample because that is already indicated by a high viral load in the sewage specimen that we have tested. Everybody is now predicting that we will have a pretty sizeable percentage of people infected with COVID-19 in Hong Kong. So hopefully through the Compulsory Universal Testing, we will try to identify these infected cases and put them in isolation.

To ensure the success, we need a lot more isolation facilities. We will keep on identifying these isolation facilities, whether in the form of units like the Penny's Bay or the CIF hotel, that is Community Isolation Facility hotel, or like AWE (AsiaWorld-Expo) which is a large hall, an indoor stadium and so on which will be converted into beds rather than individual units. All the facilities that are being identified will be built as soon as possible, and they will come on stage as soon as possible. During the CUT, at the moment we have no plans to disallow people to leave their home because that would be very difficult to implement as a large number of people have to go out to work especially in relation to the anti-epidemic work. Whenever we have something that is mandatory you have to think about exemptions; how to identify all those people who need to be exempted, allowing them to go out to work for essential services and to support the anti-epidemic work or to support the financial services in Hong Kong is a very big issue. So we will not likely take a decision to disallow people to go out on a wholesale and a prolonged basis. One night is okay, two days may be also okay but the CUT will take place within the month of March, for three times, so how long are we going to lock up the people of Hong Kong? Let's do not focus on a city lockdown or a lockdown, let's focus on how we could ensure the 7.4 million people in Hong Kong will embrace this compulsory universal testing and take an active part so that it will be a successful scheme.

I don't exactly understand your point about compensation. If you refer to our prolonged implementation of social distancing measures where we are imposing closures on a large number of premises, we will continue to help these enterprises as we did. In this wave alone we have introduced two rounds of Anti-epidemic Fund assistance – AEF 5.0, AEF 6.0 – costing \$30 billion. We will continue to monitor the situation and do our best to help the affected enterprises but tomorrow happens to be the Annual Budget day, so we will have to see what the Financial Secretary has to tell us about the possible relief measures for enterprises and individuals in Hong Kong and based on that, if there is still the need to help, we certainly will help them. Thank you.

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