

Transcript of remarks by CE at media session before ExCo meeting

Following is the transcript of remarks by the Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, at a media session before the Executive Council meeting with the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan today (March 17):

Reporter: First question: several countries have taken the path of banning entry for everyone except residents, so why has the Government not taken this move but instead chose the path of travel alerts or stepping up the quarantine requirements? Second question: everyone entering Hong Kong from first day will be quarantined for 14 days. Do we have enough quarantine centre spaces looking forward and while most of the people will be doing a home quarantine, does the Government have enough manpower and resources to conduct checks and offer support etc, as you mentioned, because it's a huge team of people supporting this whole quarantine arrangement? Third question: CE, you have mentioned that it is impossible to end the class suspension on April 20. Do you have the estimate of when class can really resume and will it be possible that class can't really restart till the end of this school term – that is July? Thank you.

Chief Executive: Thank you very much for those three questions. First is about banning entry except Hong Kong residents. This is a very drastic step which we did implement very early in the day on January 27 as far as residents coming from Hubei and Wuhan. As I said throughout the process of this anti-epidemic work, we have to base our decisions on science, on the actual situation on the ground and other implications. And the important point is, if I can share this statistic with you, all the confirmed cases, especially those so-called imported cases or those who have travel history during the incubation period, or the close contacts, up to now they are all Hong Kong residents. With that factual situation, I think it is a bit too drastic to go into that sort of total banning because we have to understand that there are always some very genuine and compassionate cases on an exceptional basis that despite a 14-day quarantine they need to come to Hong Kong. Hong Kong as I said, while we are still in the epidemic situation, we have to allow the city to continue, the business to resume, otherwise we may have more problems on the economic front.

The second point is a very valid one which I have explained at some length. We will be seeing more people who require compulsory quarantine or medical surveillance. I have said that we have very limited quarantine centre, basically now is about maybe 1,600 places, including three blocks in Chun Yeung Estate. With this very limited quarantine centre facilities, we have taken the view that they should be reserved for the really high risk cases. Who are the high risk cases? One is the close contacts of confirmed cases. And you don't know, I don't have a crystal ball, sometimes one confirmed case could give rise to a hundred of close contact cases, so we have to reserve that capacity for the high risk cases. Secondly, from time to

time we have unforeseen incidents like Heng Tai House of Fu Heng Estate in Tai Po. It's an unforeseeable incident that suddenly we need to evacuate and put them into quarantine centre because they are also high risk cases. From now on, I would say the majority of arrivals in Hong Kong will be put under home quarantine or medical surveillance of some form.

Your question then is how can we assure that there will be good compliance for the home quarantine cases. We will do our best in terms of the monitoring, the surveillance, the telephone calls, the WhatsApp location services and spot checks. But at the end of the day because of the large numbers involved -right now we already have over 20,000 active home quarantine cases, we are expecting more- so I am appealing to individuals who are being put under home quarantine to have self-discipline, to observe the rules and the requirements and to protect themselves and their family members and ultimately of course protect Hong Kong from a major outbreak. Since we have been doing quite well in the last two months, we really should preserve these results that we have made through joint efforts. But we will increase our staffing at various levels. I have asked for more civil servants to be enlisted to join this anti-epidemic work, both at the airport and in the various back offices to support the home quarantine work.

Class resumption is a very tricky matter because we are talking about 900,000 students, especially those in primary schools and kindergartens. At the moment I could not say categorically, but what I can say with a bit of assurance and support from the experts is they said "Chief Executive, you don't expect to be able to resume all schools in the next month or so". It would not be possible because of the global situation that we have seen and especially because this virus is a bit tricky. There's a lot pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic cases in society, so I'm saying that even if the situation stabilises to the extent that we could resume, it will be by phases. We'll be starting with the older students in the senior secondary, so the chances for the very young kids to go back to school, say within the next one to two months, will be quite slim. But having said that I am still gearing up the production and supply of children's masks so that when the day comes, we will not be facing another problem that we could not resume because we do not have the mask supply for the kids to wear. We will keep you informed. In fact, I understand that even today, apart from the 4.30pm regular press conference, we may have another briefing by our CHP to talk about other subjects because things are changing very rapidly.

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