

Transcript of remarks by CE at media session before ExCo meeting (with video)

Following is the transcript of remarks by the Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam at a media session before the Executive Council meeting today (January 19):

Reporter: On the rebounding infection of COVID-19, would the Government extend the social distancing measures apart from what you just suggested? Would the Government consider other measures such as financial assistance or relaunching measures to support employment? Yesterday when health officials talked about the COVID-19 situation they sort of suggested that the ethnic minorities' cultural background put them at risk, so do you think that actually there's some sort of racial insensitivity in their remarks? Was the Government's measure to blame rather than the ethnic minorities' background to blame? Secondly, you just talked about Hong Kong electoral reforms but actually the NPCSC (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress) meeting from tomorrow will also talk about BNO and dual nationality. The BNO visa scheme will open for applications on January 31 and a lot of Hong Kong people will be applying and moving abroad. So would the Government do anything about it? Finally, as the Government extends the oath-taking requirement to civil servants, do you think they will really take their oath genuinely or actually a lot of them would rather quit the Government? Thank you.

Chief Executive: Thank you, there are three questions on different subjects. First of all, in light of the latest COVID-19 pandemic situation, it is quite obvious that there is no room yet for us to relax the social distancing measures that have been put in place, and which will expire on Thursday this week. I have already implied that they will be extended, but I will leave the Secretary for Food and Health to announce the exact measures and the duration of this round of extension of the social distancing measures. But at the same time I fully understand the hardship on the various business sectors, especially those that have been required to close for over two months now. Last Tuesday I said that here and I repeated it just now that I have asked my bureaux and departments to sit down and discuss with the various sectors whether we could find more sophisticated means to enhance the infection control and to enhance contact tracing of the staff and the customers so that there could be a possibility for some resumption of business in due course. This is a piece of work that we will continue to do.

The Hong Kong SAR Government has been rolling out financial relief schemes in the whole year last year. It was a heavy toll on the public finances of the Hong Kong SAR, so we have to be very prudent. At the moment I understand we have no plans to extend the Employment Support Scheme (ESS) and hence, I can foresee that the unemployment figures that the Government is

going to announce this afternoon will be bad, because the ESS which safeguarded employment and jobs expired towards the end of November. This afternoon's three-month figures included the month of December, so one would expect that we are seeing more job losses and the unemployment figure will go up. Whether we would consider more financial assistance and other relief measures is a subject that we are listening to the public and the Legislative Council members because the Financial Secretary is still doing those consultation sessions on the 2021-22 Budget, which will be delivered on February 24.

You used the word "blame". I really appeal to all of you that this is not an occasion to apportion blame. The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented and we don't know enough about this disease, and at the same time there are so many intertwining factors that every government, every country has to consider. They have been approaching it in different ways with different results. I would not put any blame on anybody and I hope the public will also not put the blame on the Government. The Government has tried its very, very best, mobilising all the resources and people we could to tackle this pandemic. There is absolutely no suggestion of the spread of disease relating to race or ethnicity. If there is any misunderstanding arising from any remark made by any of the government officials, I made it absolutely clear here. Since this disease spreads through human interactions and so on, social behaviours, living conditions, workplace hygiene are factors that will make certain people more vulnerable to catching this virus, but that has nothing to do with ethnicity.

The second question about BNO – the status of BNO was made very clear during the Sino-British negotiations before 1997 and by an explanation from the National People's Congress Standing Committee before the reunification, that the BNO is a form of travel document. It is not a form of nationality. If one side, and that is the UK government, tries to deviate from that mutual understanding and bilateral agreement, then of course it is legitimate for the other side, that is the Central People's Government, to consider any countermeasures. The Hong Kong SAR Government will of course support any countermeasures to be adopted by the Central People's Government. At the moment I have no details to offer except to assure the people of Hong Kong, because the great majority of the people in Hong Kong, even if they are holding a BNO passport, are Chinese citizens, and at the same time probably in possession of a Hong Kong SAR passport, of which there are 5.8 million in circulation, they also enjoy the right of abode in Hong Kong, which gives them the various rights as enshrined in the Basic Law.

Oath taking is a very solemn matter. It is necessary for all civil servants, in fact public servants, to take the oath in order to demonstrate that under "One Country, Two Systems" they fully understand the need to swear allegiance to the Basic Law and be loyal to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Your question is very interesting – whether a civil servant or any person in taking the oath is genuine. I don't think I have an answer for that. Ultimately the test lies in the behaviour. If somebody who has taken an oath to swear allegiance and pledge loyalty has subsequently done something which is in breach of the oath, then appropriate actions will

have to be taken by the authorities. Thank you.

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