

Transcript of remarks by CE at media session before ExCo (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 (August 17):

Reporter: Nearly 90 000 people have left Hong Kong since mid-2020 and now people are worried that the foreign companies could be leaving too with the anti-foreign sanctions law. Officials said the local legislative process would help the Government to address their concerns. But how long would this process take? Would the LegCo be required to complete the process by the end of October? About 1 500 companies chose Hong Kong for their regional headquarters. Are you worried that many of them could be leaving with this new law and if that happens will Hong Kong continue to be known as an international financial centre?

My second question is on quarantine arrangements. We know that 15 places will soon become "high-risk" and require 21 days of quarantine. But when will the Government implement the scientific committee's recommendation about 14-day quarantine for people from low and medium-risk countries with antibody? And would the Government also consider postponing the arrangement under which visitors from these countries only need seven days of quarantine if they pass the antibody test at the airport? Is it possible that we can impose a stricter ban for people visiting from low and medium-risk countries? Thank you.

Chief Executive: Thank you for the two questions. First of all I realise that recently there has been a lot of discussion on people leaving Hong Kong, and this figure of 90 000, which was a figure released regularly on the so-called net inflow and net outflow, has stirred up some debate. I do not want to sound defensive but one has to look into how this figure was arrived at. It is a sort of net figure of the number of outflow minus the number of inflow. So, yes, there may be an increase in the number of outflows, but you will also notice that we have a significant reduction in the number of people coming in, mainly from the Mainland because of the travel restrictions. The number of one-way permit holders, that is Mainlanders coming into Hong Kong for family reunion, has significantly reduced because of the travel restrictions. We are nowhere near the figure, used to be about 150 on average a day. That is a factor that one should look into.

But never mind those figures. As I said, I don't want to be defensive and to say that there is no person leaving Hong Kong for various reasons. My stance has always been Hong Kong people has freedom of movement, they have a free mind. They could decide where to go and when to leave Hong Kong or come back to Hong Kong, particularly for families with young children who may want children to have another form of education. But it is very important for Hong Kong to continue to be able to attract talents and to retain talents in Hong

Kong, and, of course, also to nurture local talents. I can assure you that we are doing these on every front. On nurturing talents, we are continuing to invest in education and we are even doing more on the STEM education because we do see innovation and technology as an emerging engine of growth for Hong Kong. There are two recent developments which may prove that Hong Kong remains very attractive. As you know we have a Quality Migrant Admission Scheme that brings in talents from all over the world. There used to be a quota of 1 000 which was never used up previously. In my Policy Address, I think last year, I raised this quota in anticipation of our capacity and ability to recruit more quality migrants. I was told by the committee that there was a significant increase in the successful applicants under the Quality Migrant Admission Scheme. In other words, more talents are now coming to settle in Hong Kong.

The second incident regarding the scheme that I introduced last year in my Policy Address is about the Global STEM Professorship Scheme. We are trying to recruit very promising or very distinguished scientists from all over the world to come to Hong Kong to join us in innovation and technology development. We have money for only a quota of 100 universities' nominations. This is, by the way, not an application or employment admission scheme. This is by nomination. We receive more than 100 nominations from the UGC-funded (University Grants Committee) institutions and the first batch of successful nominees exceeded 40 already. And many of them come from very distinguished universities all over the world. While at the same time people choose to leave Hong Kong, I am pretty optimistic that with our fundamental strengths and the opportunities available upon integrating into the Mainland development, particularly the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, we will be able to recruit more talents.

Similarly for foreign companies using Hong Kong as a regional headquarters, regional office or setting up a local office, Hong Kong will continue to be an attractive destination. In recent interactions with the business chambers based in Hong Kong, I have this very strong feeling that their initial anxiety about the National Security Law has subsided. You are right that the passing of the Anti-foreign Sanctions Law by the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) and its likely application to Hong Kong by inclusion in Annex III of Basic Law may have generated other anxiety. I said on this occasion last Tuesday that my advice and, sort of, opinion to the National People's Congress Standing Committee is for us to go through a local legislative process so that we could be in a better position to explain the purpose of this Anti-foreign Sanctions Law and to take into account Hong Kong's actual situation before we prepare this piece of local legislation. At the moment we don't have an explicit timetable because the NPCSC has yet to make a decision on listing this Anti-foreign Sanctions Law into Annex III of Basic Law for application to Hong Kong, but we have started some initial discussion on what the law should look like if there is going to be a piece of local legislation. By the way we do have local legislation to implement CPG's (Central People's Government) decisions on UN sanctions. It is not an entirely alien area that we do not know how to draft the law. At this moment I could not give you a timetable, but one will realise that the sixth term Legislative Council only have two more months to go. They will go

into prorogue by the end of October to prepare for the general election on December 19. In my opinion it will be an extremely tight timetable to rush a piece of legislation with the necessary consultation with stakeholders within this term of the Legislative Council, but that is my opinion at the moment, because I could not pre-empt the National People's Congress Standing Committee on its decision sometime this week.

On the quarantine arrangement, we are facing changing circumstances on a very frequent basis, especially with these so-called variants of concern and the prevalence of Delta in many places, and experts have told us that Delta is more infectious than other variants of concern. That's why we need to adapt our policies, especially border control policies, to make sure that we are able to prevent the importation of Delta cases and its spread into the community. The experts have come to a view at a joint scientific group meeting last night – they are recommending that the Government should reverse an earlier decision, again based on their advice in June, that antibody test could be used as an instrument to reduce the quarantine period so that we could accommodate more aspirations of people to come back or to come in, because the 21-day or the 14-day designated hotel quarantine is quite a challenge for many people. We announced in Phase I, based on that earlier expert advice, to allow Hong Kong residents who have been fully vaccinated to go for an antibody test, and with that test certificate valid for three months they can go out, and when they come back with a test certificate which is still valid, then they could reduce the quarantine period to seven days if they are not coming back from the high-risk area, that is now the Group A countries. This has been in place and I understand many people have benefited from this arrangement. But exactly because of this arrangement, we are seeing breakthroughs – people who have been fully vaccinated but still being infected and confirmed positive while they were being quarantined or, in one case, while they had left the quarantine hotel. So, the experts have been asked to have a meeting last night and they, sort of, advised us that with the prevalence of Delta in many places, it is better to err on the side of caution. That means we will not be introducing Phase II which we have announced, that is for non-Hong Kong residents to get a certificate of antibody test in Hong Kong and then reduce the quarantine period. We may even have to suspend the Phase I for Hong Kong residents. For details, I would leave it to the Secretary for Food and Health. I think the Bureau will issue a detailed statement later today in light of the joint scientific group's advice.

This proves that it is not an exact science to deal with COVID-19. We have to continuously review the situation together with the experts and take account of their advice to design our policies. I have to apologise to those people who have been inconvenienced or who have their plans disrupted as a result of this change in the use of antibody test, but I hope they will understand that everything we are doing is to protect Hong Kong from another major outbreak that we have seen and we have suffered. We do not want to reverse our decisions on a frequent basis and we have managed not to do so since April 12 when I announced this new direction. But sometimes in order to err on the side of caution and to prevent the spread of the disease, we have to do it and this is why we are going to act in accordance with the experts'

advice and announce the details later today.

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