

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 24):

Reporter: First question, other countries like Australia, New Zealand or Singapore that adopt zero-COVID strategy are reviewing if it's still applicable. Can the CE provide a road map to people of Hong Kong at what stage we will cut quarantine for vaccinated people as the Delta variant won't be gone in the near future? And the second question, you have appealed to employers to require workers to get vaccinated or to get tested regularly, so will all statutory bodies be the first to implement such measures and how will you encourage the private sector to follow suit? Will you expand the vaccination scheme to allow everyone walk-in instead of specific age group and so on? And the last question, you have mentioned about designated quarantine hotels for foreign domestic helpers. Can you tell us more about the details like how many of them and how many stages, and are you afraid that the quota is not enough to meet the high demand of labour in Hong Kong? Thank you.

Chief Executive: Thank you for the three questions relating to our anti-epidemic work. First of all, there has been a debate in many places about the strategy to tackle COVID-19, and I'm sure in deciding which is the best strategy for their own country or region or place, each government will take into account a number of factors. There is no one-size-fits-all approach in dealing with COVID-19. On top of that, the World Health Organization has also issued certain guidelines for member countries to follow. In our situation, you take Hong Kong and Singapore as examples, Singapore's vaccination rate, as far as I understand, already reaches or exceeds 80 per cent of the population; whereas in our case, up to last night, it was 58.7 per cent. There is a huge difference between the vaccination situation in these two places. That is perhaps one factor that Singapore government has taken into account, whereas I have to take into account that we have not reached a reassuring rate of vaccination in the population. I think this debate between whether one is going for a zero approach, that is eradicating COVID-19, or moving into a stage of living with COVID-19, is not a black and white issue. As far as the Hong Kong SAR Government is concerned, we will keep on reviewing the situation, monitoring the vaccination, and then we will take the best decision for the people of Hong Kong.

Encouraging, promoting or even urging enterprises and corporations to require their staff to get vaccinated is one of the strategies to raise the vaccination rate. As you know, we have already put that requirement in place for the civil service, as the Secretary for the Civil Service has said in public that about 88 per cent of all civil servants have been vaccinated, and we certainly would apply that to our statutory bodies, and I think the

Airport Authority has also announced similar stringent requirements. I don't think we need to provide sort of tangible incentives to the private sector, as it is to their own benefit to require their employees to be vaccinated, so that Hong Kong could build up a defence as soon as possible to enable the Government to decide on more relaxations that they want to see – relaxations in the form of allowing more people and tourists to come in, relaxation in terms of the social distancing measures so that they could do more businesses. There is a common objective between the business world and the Hong Kong SAR Government – to increase the vaccination rate. If they want a very strong and clear message from the Government, I'm now giving that very strong signal and message that they should move into the situation of requiring their employees to be vaccinated. If they could not or refuse to vaccinate, then at least they should be required to produce, on a very regular basis, negative COVID-19 tests in order to enable them to continue to work. Otherwise we will not be assured that if there is a confirmed case, infections would not spread in the Hong Kong community.

About the special arrangement to discuss with the two governments of the Philippines and Indonesia, in order for their vaccination records to be recognised in Hong Kong so that foreign domestic helpers from these two countries could come back to Hong Kong – but still subject to the 21-day quarantine now applicable to Group A countries, that is high-risk countries. It's the balance that we are always trying to strike – on the one hand to meet the essential needs of the Hong Kong residents, but on the other hand to keep COVID-19 at bay, that is to reduce as much as possible the chance of importing COVID-19 cases from abroad. So the number of foreign domestic helpers who could come back to Hong Kong through this special arrangement has to be rationed and controlled. We could not allow thousands of foreign domestic helpers to come in every week, otherwise the chance of having more confirmed cases either discovered at the airport or during the quarantine period will overload the Hong Kong public hospital system. The arrangement is to require them to do their 21-day mandatory quarantine in a designated hotel. We already have designated quarantine hotels – there are quite a number of them that the arrival passengers could freely book, but for foreign domestic helpers, we will put them or require them to book a special designated hotel. Right now, we have secured one with about 400 hotel rooms, we will try to get another one later on, so that they will come back in phases. That is the arrangement that we are putting in place, so I would ask the employers of foreign domestic helpers to be more patient with the system because they will not be able to welcome their foreign domestic helpers back in a very short period. If there are a few thousands being stranded in the Philippines and Indonesia, it will need quite a bit of time to allow them to come back in an orderly manner.

Thank you.

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