

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 (January 25):

Reporter: Good morning, Mrs Lam. A couple of questions. First, why is the Secretary for Home Affairs, Caspar Tsui, still not allowed to resume his duties and how will you deal with other officials who attended the same party? Second, on the lockdowns at Kwai Chung Estate, what is your response to reports and online posts on complaints from residents there about the lockdown saying that there are overfilled bins, garbage piling up and poor meals arrangements? What is the threshold for extending or imposing new lockdowns in the estate? And lastly you mentioned possibly expanding the "vaccine bubble" and keeping social distancing rules. So given the current COVID-19 situation in Hong Kong and calls from experts to ask people to wear two masks for further protection, why do you still choose to not wear a face mask during this session? Thank you.

Chief Executive: Thank you for the three questions. First of all is about the internal investigation into the disciplinary aspects of the officials who attended the birthday party/reception on January 3. The investigations are coming to an end, and I would make my best effort to announce the investigation result and the consequential actions before the Chinese New Year. I would need to emphasise that for the total of 15 public officials including one who is on pre-retirement leave, you should not treat them as a homogeneous group. I said on January 6 as well as on January 7 in my press statement that we need to deal with each individual official's attendance at this dinner party. The scope of investigation includes when he arrived, how long he stayed in the dinner reception, which means that when he left, and what sort of activities he or she was engaged in during their stay in the dinner party. This is not a homogeneous group. In other words, one would not expect that the internal investigations will come to the same conclusion and hence the same sanction for all the 15 officials as a group. You remember I said that while I would deal with the investigation in a very impartial manner, 秉公處理, 秉公處理 in Chinese, I also said that I had to be fair to each official involved. They are not in the same group.

Having said that, by now it should be quite obvious based on what I said on January 6 that the Secretary for Home Affairs is an official whom we will have to look into very deeply because of various aspects. He stayed long. I already told you that he was one of those who stayed for a pretty long period at a pretty late time of the dinner party and his position as the Secretary for Home Affairs who is involved in the anti-epidemic operation of the Hong Kong SAR Government. I have already asked that he should not come to work until the investigation is completed and the results announced to the public, including any possible sanctions. That is the reason why I have asked him to

continue to take his leave and not to come to office because he is in a very important position, the Secretary for Home Affairs.

The second question is about the Kwai Chung case, there is no doubt that we have a major spread in the Kwai Chung Estate based on the Omicron variant, which is highly transmissible. And by now, on an accumulative basis, we already have 220-plus confirmed or preliminary positive cases in the Kwai Chung Estate. But in the same way that I described the 15 officials, if you look at these 220-plus cases spreading over the 16 blocks in the Kwai Chung Estate, they vary significantly. Yat Kwai House is clearly the core of all these infections with a large number of cases. Having a look at the situation from an epidemiological perspective, and the mere fact that yesterday (January 24) we still discovered new cases in the Yat Kwai House, and they are not isolated cases – I think the figure is over 20 such cases emerging in the Yat Kwai House – that's why to play safe protecting the residents as well as preventing the spread of this virus, we have no choice but to extend the RTD, that is the "restriction-testing declaration" for another two days, that is from five days to a total of seven days. I fully understand the impact on the residents, and there are over 2 500 residents alone in the Yat Kwai House. We will continue to step up our staff mobilisation to provide support to the residents. Now including the Ha Kwai House that I announced this morning, we will have three blocks of residents totalling over 7 000 people who need to be supported in the next few days in terms of their breakfast, lunch, dinner and all their daily necessities, their requirement for drugs and so on. I would not say that we have done it in a perfect manner but we will continue to improve. I already said that we will improve in terms of the hotline enquiry, cleaning the rubbish and distributing the meal boxes, and also arranging in an orderly manner for the residents to undergo compulsory testing.

As far as the "vaccine bubble" is concerned, let me put it that way, there is no doubt that vaccination remains the most effective way in order to tackle the virus, including Omicron. Unfortunately, in Hong Kong, we have been doing vaccination for almost a year – we started in February last year, so it's almost one year – but our vaccination rate still lags behind places in our vicinity, the Mainland, Singapore and other places. We really need to jack up the vaccination rates, especially amongst the elderly. They have been very co-operative, we are seeing the rates coming up but still it's not yet reached a stage that we feel safe. You could imagine that one of the primary objectives of our anti-epidemic work is to protect our public health system, to protect Hong Kong's public hospitals. If an elderly person gets infected, for example just for argument's sake, a care worker living in Yat Kwai House is serving this elderly person in an elderly home and the elderly person gets infected and spreads the virus to the other elderly, and all of them have to be admitted into hospital, they would have to stay pretty long in the hospital because of their pre-conditions, or even die in the hospital. That would be a major load on Hong Kong's public hospitals. And the last thing we want to see is a collapse of the Hong Kong public hospital system as we have seen in some other places, so we are finding and exploring all ways to enhance the creation of all this "vaccine bubble", in other words, to impose vaccination as a requirement for entry into the prescribed premises or

joining certain activities.

Finally, it is a very personal question but I welcome this opportunity for me to explain once and for all why I am not wearing a mask on this occasion. This is not incidental, this is a well thought-out behaviour of the Chief Executive. I stopped wearing a face mask on two occasions when I speak to the media and through the media to the people of Hong Kong. One is in the Legislative Council Chamber when I was delivering my Policy Address, when I went in to answer questions and so on. The other is standing here in the Auditorium talking to you, and through you – because every time I come out it's televised – to the people of Hong Kong. The people of Hong Kong have to hear very clearly from the Chief Executive what are the messages that she is conveying to the public. The people of Hong Kong may even have to feel my emotions. Sometimes, I am pretty relaxed. For example, in August last year, the virus situation was well under control and our athletes were doing so well. I came here to talk to you in a very relaxed and very elated mood. But now, I'm very somber and solemn because I'm very worried, and wearing a mask would not allow people to see for themselves the chief of the Hong Kong SAR. I'm the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong SAR, people need to understand and feel my feeling. Now I'm very worried and so I'm not going to smile to you or be very relaxed or in a very casual manner. This is a very solemn occasion, so I'm not doing it because of discomfort. I'm not taking off my mask because of discomfort. If you see me on the street, I am wearing my mask. If I do my three-day presentation at the Honours and Awards Presentation Ceremony, six hours a day, I wore my mask. But now, I'm talking to the people of Hong Kong and I want the people of Hong Kong to understand exactly the situation that Hong Kong is in and to pool their efforts to support this very important fight against the Omicron. I hope I answer once and for all, this is nothing personal. I am really performing my duty as the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

I am coming to the end of this media stand-up. As I said this is the last occasion before the Chinese New Year. I wish you all a relaxed and peaceful Chinese New Year but you will see me before you break off for the Chinese New Year holiday.

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