

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

Following is the transcript of remarks by the Chief Executive, Mr John Lee, at a media session before the Executive Council meeting today (February 20):

Reporter: Good morning. You talked about the visitor arrival figures, how do you assess these figures? Do you think the tourism sector has fully recovered? What's the Government doing to help sustain the growth apart from organising more mega events? Secondly, about the consultation period of (the legislation of the Basic Law) Article 23, because the period is ending in a week, can you tell us how much feedback you've received from the general public and also specific groups like chambers of commerce? Will the Government summarise and publish these views? Do you have a rough estimate when you will be tabling the bill to the Legislative Council? Thank you.

Chief Executive: I have given you some factual statistics about the number of visitors to Hong Kong. I have explained that, first of all, the numbers of visitors from overseas and Mainland cities have been going up and some figures have actually come back to pre-COVID time. In some areas, actually, the figures are higher. I have previously mentioned that the incoming visitor figures from the Philippines or Thailand have actually gone over the pre-COVID figures. The last figure I just quoted regarding Mainland visitors, you can also see that the number of visitors have gone back to pre-COVID time, more or less. Then, do we have further growth in the tourist numbers? I think yes, because the capacity building is still being worked on by different industries, including the aviation industry. Shortage of labour, for example, has been addressed by various importation of labour measures. The Labour Department is busily processing applications so that the number of people working in Hong Kong can be sufficient to handle the bottlenecks. These bottlenecks, whether they are in the transportation sector, aviation sector, service sector or catering sector, will be addressed in due course. Of course, I want these figures to be up and coming in a fast speed so that we can have a quicker speed of recovery. But I am glad to see that my colleagues are working hard, and also industries are playing their part actively. I have confidence that 2024 will see a lot of strengthening of capacities in different areas. Some sectors have already indicated that they believe that there will be 100 per cent recovery towards the end of the year, but I still want the recovery speed to be faster.

The different promotion activities that we are doing, I think, is acting as a good magnet for all activities that take place in Hong Kong, and they are all attractions for people from different parts of the world to come to Hong Kong. We have just stepped into 2024, the Year of the Dragon as well, and you see all these positive signs showing up, and I have just earlier informed you of the rising figures in different areas, including our convention and exhibition sector. Some people even say that those 300-odd

events will mean almost one event a day in the year of 2024, and altogether there will be a lot of events. Some big events are coming back to Hong Kong. Some of them have moved out of Hong Kong because of COVID; I have told you some examples of them coming back to Hong Kong. The Government is serious in promoting mega events, promoting different activities so that Hong Kong will be the brand for people to realise activities which will bring results and value. Hong Kong has strengths in many regards because this is the place where East meets West, and it is a cultural hub, and an arts hub as well.

All these events I have told you will add together, and I think the critical mass is being built up. When the critical mass is built up, I think the momentum will be self-reinforcing. But the Government will continue to work hard, and will take no complacency because I think there is never the best, only the better. That is what I want my colleagues to do, and also something I want Hong Kong people to be aware of and work together because we are in constant competition with other cities. All cities want to promote tourism and mega events, to promote their own attractions and competitiveness. We must work hard, and we must double our efforts. We must unite together. Don't waste our time on internal dissipation of energy. Yes, if there are views and suggestions that will bring overall good, we will listen. But it is important that we know it is a complicated world, not just for economic reasons, sometimes things happen for political reasons. So we have to be up and keep our eyes open so that we know what are the things that we need to unite on. We do the work together, we reduce dissipation of energy and ensure that we are in a good form and good state to compete with our neighbours.

In regard to Article 23, yes, next week the consultation period will be completed. We have been receiving a lot of opinions. The majority of them support Article 23 enactment, and some of the opinions are also in response to the consultation document because we have been quite elaborate in presenting the different things that various jurisdictions and countries are doing. We also believe that because of what we went through in 2019 – the attempted “colour revolution” and the “dark violence”, the awareness has been very strong.

One important thing is that the general opinion gives me the impression that they are in support of the overall goal of enacting Article 23 to ensure that we protect ourselves when people want to cause damage to us. A lot of opinions subscribe to the idea that this is a piece of legislation that will ensure that when other people want to break into our house, cause harm or damage to us, the Article 23 enactment should be able to protect us from all these threats, attacks, break-ins and harms. We will of course report the overall result of the consultation in due course to the Legislative Council. The general consensus is that if we can do it one day earlier, we should do it one day earlier because the threat continues, and the threat actually has been mounting. So we must gear up our efforts to ensure that we will do it as soon as possible. And we will do it as soon as possible.

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