

Transcript of remarks of press conference

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, held a press conference this afternoon (February 3). Also joining were the Secretary for Security, Mr John Lee; the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan; the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan; the Director of Immigration, Mr Tsang Kwok-wai; the Director of Health, Dr Constance Chan; and the Chief Executive of the Hospital Authority, Dr Tony Ko. Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference.

Reporter: Forgive me, Mrs Lam, asking you in English. If you could reply in English for my audience it would be great. Can I ask you this? Why haven't you closed all the border crossings? You know, an open border is an open border and the longer it remains open, the greater the danger to the people of Hong Kong. Isn't that the truth of this?

Chief Executive: In answering your question, you have to understand that the situation between Hong Kong and the Mainland of China is almost unique. Over the years we have established a very close relationship. I don't mean the government-to-government relationship, but it is a relationship between the two people, the two economies, the two communities, so there is a huge demand, I suppose a huge legitimate demand, for that sort of cross-border travel. And that's why I'm quoting you figures that there were indeed more Hong Kong people crossing the border almost on a daily basis, and then they have to come back. The purposes as I could understand will include work. I'm sure you have come across people who work in Hong Kong, live in Shenzhen, or who live in Hong Kong and work in Shenzhen, because of the technology industries and so on. And there is also demand for looking after young family. I'm sure you have also heard about we have a large number of children who have the right of abode in Hong Kong but their mothers do not have that right yet, so they may have to cross the border on a frequent basis to look after their children. And then we have the supply of food and other necessities. Although of course we are keeping the cargo clearance open, there's a lot of logistics involved that require people to cross the border. I can continue to give you examples of this very legitimate and genuine cross-border traffic that we need to handle. Otherwise, we will end up with more troubles for the operation of this city and also for the 7 million population of Hong Kong.

Our strategy is really to consolidate as much as possible the existing control points. Now it's really down to, excluding the airport, only two – one is the Shenzhen Bay, the other is the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge – and the additional benefit of doing that is we are channelling all cross-border traffic into these two cross-border control points. And because of the inconvenience that we have caused to people as a result, the numbers will come down, and I have proven that the numbers have come down. The second merit is we can then concentrate the people, I mean the staff. We can release

a rough estimate of about 1,000 civil servants from the other control points to be suspended operation into these two remaining open control points, so they can do much better medical surveillance, enquiries, temperature check and so on, in order to fulfil that same purpose of infection control. This is really a balance that one has to strike, given Hong Kong's very unique situation. But as I said, this is not the end of our strategy or our efforts. We will continue to monitor the situation and take whatever necessary steps to protect Hong Kong from this infection.

Reporter: Mrs Lam, you just said that some of the demands made by the medics that are currently on strike are irrational and I see they have two demands for you: one is to maintain a steady supply of masks to Hong Kong and the second being that to impose a ban for travellers coming into Hong Kong from Mainland regardless of origin. Can you make clear on which part of that is irrational? Second question being that, you said that excluding the airport you will be channelling cross-border traffic within Hong Kong-Mainland into two ports but actually seeing from statistic from the Immigration Department, actually the airport accounted for over 4,000 or over 5,000 travellers from Mainland in the past two days, will that remain a loophole in your measures against the new virus? Will more port health measures be put at the ports that remain open to make sure that people coming in are healthy and fit? Third question being on mask supply, you said that the Government cannot release the masks made by inmates to the public but we have seen reports that it had somehow made it onto the market. Can you explain how these masks produced that are for internal consumption have made their way into the market? Thank you.

Chief Executive: I answer the third question first. As I have mentioned, as far as I could gather, the masks produced by the Correctional Services Department under this arrangement of CSI should be for government use. Whether government use also includes some public sector use I have yet to find out, but they should not be sold in the market because they have very stringent requirements, the S for S (Secretary for Security) could also supplement. I couldn't explain why they have gone into the market because this is an anomaly, so we have to find out and investigate if need be. That is my simple answer.

The second question about airport; airport of course is a very important control point, and airport services not only travellers from Mainland but from all over the world, and it is very important for Hong Kong to keep the Hong Kong International Airport open for both passengers and cargo. For the category of Mainland visitors coming in and out at the airport, one has to differentiate between those coming from abroad. They are not coming from an infected area per se, they are coming from abroad into Hong Kong, so this group should be of no difference to other international travellers coming into the Hong Kong International Airport. But we still have obligations to ensure the safety that you have mentioned. At the airport it is really a very important control point that we have introduced the more stringent measures at the very beginning, including the latest arrangement based on the WHO advice to do exit screening because normally the health authority is less concerned about exit, they're more concerned about entry. But on this

occasion because of our airport and the international connectivity, we have been doing exit screening for passengers leaving Hong Kong at the Hong Kong International Airport. If there are mainlanders coming by plane to the Hong Kong International Airport, without even a very explicit policy, I'm sure the numbers will come down because the frequency of the flights is coming down significantly. Last time when I shared with you what we were doing, I said that the Secretary for Transport and Housing has been liaising with the airlines and the authorities and then the target was perhaps to halve the flights per week between Hong Kong and Mainland. I'm sure Frank would say the latest development because of different things happening that this frequency may be further reduced. I answer the first question and then invite the Secretary for Transport and Housing to say something about aviation.

As far as the union in the Hospital Authority starting their five-day strike today, they have several demands. That's why I said if you look through the objectives of what they want to do, we are not so different. The objective is to protect Hong Kong and to lessen as much as possible the workload at the Hospital Authority and the chances of being infected. If you ask me to comment individually on their demands, I have no problem with their request that we should try to ensure a stable supply. We have been doing it for quite some time but I'm explaining to you the difficulties because there is a global demand for these protective gear and equipment. We are doing a worldwide search. We are calling up even individual suppliers and industrialists who have plants all over the world to see whether they could help to give Hong Kong a needed supply. And I can assure you that money is not an issue. We are not asking for competitive tendering. Whoever has a supply, as long as it fulfils the specifications according to the Department of Health and they can be sent to Hong Kong, there will be direct purchases by the Government Logistics Department. But the difficulties are very real, so while on one hand I accept and admit the need to ensure a stable supply, that is not something that I could promise without conditions because they are not locally produced. They have to come from overseas.

Finally this demand in their list of demands is about a complete closure of the borders I have just explained to John, so it's the same answer. As far as a ban on travellers from Mainland, you have been given some of the figures. In terms of numbers, and by the way, when it comes to infection control, when it comes to a virus, there is no boundary, so you cannot differentiate that people of a certain race, of a certain nationality, of a certain residential status or holding a certain travel document are more prone to infection than other people. So we have to treat them equally as long as these people cross the border from an infected area, say from Mainland, they have the same risk, so we treat them similarly. And in terms of numbers of people, the Hong Kong people returning to Hong Kong or arriving in our control points, the number is much bigger than just talking about mainlanders or other travellers, like Americans, Japanese or French, so the question is by consolidating the control points, making it very inconvenient for people to cross the border, we hope and we have demonstrated that it will bring down the numbers, but I do not rule out further measures as the situation evolves.

Secretary for Transport and Housing: As we have explained to the Consulate General assembly yesterday, as a member of the global community, flight connection between cities is a very important link for people to travel from one country to another. Therefore, the Hong Kong International Airport (and us) have done everything we can. For example, for all (Mainland) passengers arriving at the Hong Kong International Airport, they would have to go through the health declaration process. They would have to go through the thermal screening to see whether they are fit to be admitted into Hong Kong. For passengers going overseas, they would have passed through the thermal exit screening as well, including those taking transit at the Hong Kong International Airport, whether they are coming from overseas to the Mainland or from the Mainland to overseas countries.

As one of the busiest airports across the globe, we have to discharge our responsibility as a dependable and trustworthy international airport. So we have put into place all kinds of scanning tools including hand-held equipment so that every passenger departing Hong Kong would have been scanned individually, making sure that everyone is safe and sound to travel.

As you would have noticed, there was a ban from Vietnam to suspend flights between Vietnam and Hong Kong. But after our explanation to them, informing them of the mechanism, procedures and robustness of our screening processes, they finally allowed flights to resume. We are also talking with the Italian government with respect to the passenger flight ban. I talked to the Consulate General yesterday and he promised to write back to the Italian government, explaining to them the kind of measures we have adopted in Hong Kong. I hope they would give us the green light to go ahead in the near future. I think I have explained enough why we have to maintain the international transport for Hong Kong people, overseas visitors and for anyone who travels in and out of Hong Kong and transiting in Hong Kong. Thank you.

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