

Transcript of remarks of press conference on anti-epidemic measures

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, held a press conference on anti-epidemic measures this morning (March 16). Also joining were the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, and the Controller of the Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health, Dr Edwin Tsui. Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference:

Reporter: The first question is, with the HKU (The University of Hong Kong) estimating more than half the citizens might soon to be infected, and Mrs Lam just said that the daily cases are like plateaued, are you still trying to get cases back to zero? If so, whether you will reinstate the measures like contact tracing or compulsory isolation for all cases, if the level comes down to the manageable level, and whether Hong Kong will live with the virus? And the second question will be on the Mainland. So Shenzhen and Shanghai saw, like, surge from import cases from Hong Kong and whether Beijing has ever expressed concern where people from Hong Kong would be seeding outbreaks to the Mainland and whether you anticipate further restriction for people crossing the border, either going to Mainland side or people from Mainland coming to Hong Kong?

Chief Executive: Thank you for the two questions. On the first question, I am not in a position to comment on any estimates or modelling done by our academic community. I think they are all doing it in their respective scientific way based on assumptions and the data that they have collated. Over the last two years and so, we have been working very closely with the various research groups. Some of the graphs that I have shown you just now were also taken from the study by The University of Hong Kong's Faculty of Medicine. Judging from the high numbers that we have seen, it will not be a surprise that there are still a lot of silent transmissions in society. And if people now become a bit relaxed and they go out more often and they have gatherings and so on, then this transmission will continue because Omicron is very, very highly transmissible. That's why I repeatedly tried to convey the message this morning that this is not the time for relaxation. This is not the time for being complacent that Hong Kong's epidemic situation is going to improve significantly in the short term.

I think in every society we should strive to do our best in combating a public health crisis. Hong Kong has been trying her best since January 2020 to suppress the spread of the COVID-19 virus to prevent critical illness, and of course, as far as possible, to avoid deaths. At any point in time we need to revise, review and adjust our policy measures. In the current fifth round, yes, we have made far more adjustments to our measures than the previous four rounds, because the numbers were simply not manageable if we continued to do what we had been doing in the last two years, like doing contact tracing of every case, and trying to identify the close contact, and the close contact of the close contact in every case, and putting every such close contact or

confirmed case in an institution. That is simply unrealistic. So we have to adjust our policies by going for tiered levels of isolation and treatment. And of course we will critically review our experience in this round, and decide on how Hong Kong should tackle future waves of COVID-19 or any other virus in order to achieve the best results. And let me make it clear that the best results, as I said at the very beginning of fighting the epidemic, are public health results, economic results – because I can't see the economy being torn into pieces by just going for public health measures – the third is people's acceptance and tolerance. We will continue to be guided by those important principles in devising the best public health strategy for Hong Kong.

The second question is about the border, and I have to say that the Central People's Government has been extremely understanding and supportive of Hong Kong. With the clusters now being seen very close to Hong Kong, that is in our neighbouring city of Shenzhen, one would expect that Shenzhen could easily close the border, where no Hong Kong passengers could cross the border into Shenzhen in order to cut the transmission. But Shenzhen has not taken this act, and I believe the Central People's Government also does not want to see this happen. So we still have a certain degree of people flow from Hong Kong into Shenzhen. But where the public health considerations dictate, that is Shenzhen wants to impose more stringent pre-arrival tests of PCR (polymerase chain reaction-based nucleic acid tests) obtained within 24 hours instead of 48 hours, it's a very legitimate response of the city government, and the Hong Kong SAR Government will fully co-operate and support Shenzhen in taking those legitimate measures.

Similarly for the flow of cargo, the Central People's Government, the Guangdong Government and the Shenzhen Government officials have all told me and assured me that they would try very hard to ensure the smooth arrival of cargo, especially fresh produce and vegetables that will support the people of Hong Kong. But we need to find alternative measures. Instead of just relying on 8 000 cross-border truck drivers transporting the goods on a daily basis, we now have cargo coming in by sea, we now have cargo coming in by train. This is to illustrate to you this very strong support from my Mainland counterparts, despite the difficulties or the emergency situation that they are now facing. We will continue to co-operate fully with the Mainland authorities to take the necessary measures to protect the safety and the health of people on both sides because we belong to one country and we are compatriots, and we would love to see both sides of the border coming out of this epidemic as soon as possible. Thank you.

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