

Transcript of remarks of press conference on anti-epidemic measures (with photo/video)

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, held a press conference on anti-epidemic measures this morning (March 27). Also joining was the Secretary for the Civil Service, Mr Patrick Nip. Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference:

Reporter: Good morning. On the flight suspension mechanism, what's the rationale behind shortening the suspension period from 14 to seven (days) as opposed to lowering the threshold of the number of positive cases on each flight? Why not simply cancel the mechanism as just suggested by experts and other industry representatives? And did you communicate this to the airlines and what was their feedback? For the nine countries (with place-specific flight suspension mechanism being lifted), we are still not seeing a lot of flights being resumed and we are told this route-specific suspension is a deterrent, do you think the lowering of the ban to seven days is good enough? And how will you make sure the changes did not increase the risk of transmission in the community? Now we have more than 7 100 deaths in Hong Kong, who in the Government do you think should (be) held accountable for this state of affairs? Who should bear (the) responsibility? Could these deaths have been avoidable? Thank you.

Chief Executive: Three questions. First of all, I have been asked several times on this occasion since the announcement on Monday about lifting the place-specific flight suspension. The questions revolved around whether we could also look at the route-specific flight suspension, and I said that there is no room for major relaxation because ultimately the purpose is still to ensure that we could implement effectively the policy to prevent the importation of cases into Hong Kong. This remains a fundamental pillar to Hong Kong's anti-epidemic policy. I have to make it very clear.

Having considered the latest epidemic situation and the difficulties caused to Hong Kong residents stranded in the nine countries for almost three months now, the Government considers it timely and necessary, having considered the situation, to lift the ban in respect of these nine countries, but it doesn't mean that we will loosen all the necessary anti-epidemic controls as far as importation of cases is concerned. That's why this route-specific flight suspension policy, or measure, has to continue. At the same time, if you look at the press release issued by the Food and Health Bureau last night, we are also imposing a lot of requirements for pre-boarding. In other words, those Hong Kong residents who wish to come back still have to fulfil all those requirements before they could board the plane to come back. Similarly, the airlines, as the operator of those inbound flights, also have to comply with the various requirements, for example, checking the PCR (polymerase chain reaction) negative test results of the passengers and

making sure that they have the booking of at least seven nights in a designated quarantine hotel before they allow those passengers to board the plane to come to Hong Kong. Since we have this expectation and requirement of the airlines, we need to put in some penalty. If they fail to fulfil these requirements, and bring a certain number of infected passengers into Hong Kong, then we will have to take some punitive action so that they will do better. So I said that there's no room for major relaxation.

What we announced last night could be described as the streamlining of the existing arrangements, but the most crucial control feature is the number of three – any inbound flight that brings three or more passengers who test positive upon arrival will be subject to this route-specific flight suspension. The other changes are more on streamlining and adjustments in Asia. The most important thing is we stick to every flight – you can't bring in more than three infected cases to Hong Kong.

On whether this will increase risk, there will be a certain degree of risk. In public health control, most of the measures are balancing of the risk and efforts to manage the risk in order to enable the city to continue addressing the social and development needs of Hong Kong and the individual circumstances of our people. We couldn't be too harsh with our people and the people's tolerance has always been one of the factors that we need to consider in devising the best public health measure for Hong Kong.

I could give you some figures, the risks as I see it will be manageable. If you look at the whole of February, the rate of inbound passengers who tested positive upon arrival was 0.76 per cent. And for the month of March, up to March 23, the rate was slightly higher, 1.1 per cent. If more passengers are coming back, in absolute numbers there may be more, but we believe that these percentages when compared to Hong Kong's current infection situation should be manageable. The second factor is the great majority of these infected inbound passengers were asymptomatic or had very mild symptoms. Although they tested positive via PCR test upon arrival, very few, or actually none, would need to be admitted into the HA (Hospital Authority)'s hospital. They could be transferred immediately to a CIF hotel, a community isolation facility hotel, for isolation until the test results turn negative, then they could be discharged. The second worry about overburdening Hong Kong's public hospitals and hence affecting the hospitals' capacity to treat acute or very critical patients, again, subsides. The Government's consideration is a very careful and balanced one.

Whether we have communicated to airlines, I suppose after the announcement and even somewhat before the announcement, the Transport and Housing Bureau should have talked to the airlines. But we will never be able to meet the aspirations and needs of the aviation industry in full because they are doing a business. Of course, they will not like any limitations or restrictions on how they should conduct a business, but we are in a public health emergency, so every business has to make sacrifices. The catering industry has been making a lot of sacrifices. Those scheduled premises under Cap. 599F (Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation) have been making a lot of sacrifices

because of the Government's mandatory closure of the premises. I hope and I make an appeal that airlines will also understand that we are striking a needed balance to allow some inbound flights to take place, but at the same time, we will not relax our controls in order to keep Hong Kong safe.

Everyone in Hong Kong including, of course, myself and my team, is very saddened by the number of deaths that we have seen in this fifth wave and that's why we have tried every effort and every means to address the situation. Together with the very good advice we were given by the Mainland experts, our strategy now is really to focus on the treatment side. And the first priority has been given to the elderly and hence, yesterday together with the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, we talked about how to take better care of the elderly. We set up a task group under the Labour and Welfare Bureau in order to ensure more effective communication and optimal utilisation of the holding centres, and the various facilities that we have set up. Today, the Secretary for the Civil Service is urging people to receive vaccination so that we could protect our elderly better.

Thank you.

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

