

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 11). Also joining were the Secretary for the Civil Service, Mr Patrick Nip, and the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong . Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference:

Reporter: Good morning, Mrs Lam. A new HKU (The University of Hong Kong) study by Ben Cowling and Gabriel Leung has shown that the ban on dinner dine-in services had no noticeable impact on reducing transmission during the third and fourth waves of COVID. Would your Government consider to lift the dine-in ban in light of the new findings? Second, if an arriving passenger tests positive at the airport and then negative on rapid tests on days six and seven, they're free to go. But if they test negative all along they must do the 14 days' quarantine. What's the logic and will that be rationalised? Why not shorten the inbound quarantine to seven days, freeing up hotel space for isolation facilities? And finally, the Government has blamed people with ulterior motives for the recent panic buying, yet there were U-turns over lockdown and officials leaking details to the press almost daily, perhaps trying to gauge reactions but causing confusion and chaos – government sources say this and that. With lives at stake, should the Government get a grip of their ministers and speak on record with one clear unified voice? You said communication will improve. Can that be part of it?

Chief Executive: Of the three questions, let me answer them one by one. First, I was also a bit surprised by this study quoted in some of the newspapers done by The University of Hong Kong team. As you know, throughout the two years of fighting the epidemic, we have been working very closely with universities. We have been funding a lot of research and studies on vaccination and so on carried out by the universities. I got this clarification from Professor Gabriel Leung (Dean of Medicine of The University of Hong Kong) this morning that the report about the dine-in ban for evening had no effect whatsoever on suppressing the epidemic and the spread of the virus has been taken out of context. I have not read the full report, but I got this clarification from Gabriel and he categorically told my colleague that we could quote him that the statement was taken out of context. Actually, if you thought through it, it's not quite logical. If we don't allow people to come in a restaurant, that must have a better effect than allowing people to come in, take off their masks and then have their meals together. That's point number one.

Point number two, actually I do appreciate the sort of frustrations of some of the arrivals from overseas that while we are adjusting our own quarantine and isolation policies and also introduced the discharge criteria by the Centre for Health Protection that will enable people under quarantine

or under isolation to be discharged after two repeated tests on day six and day seven, we are still adhering to the same quarantine arrangement for inbound travellers. I did explain it yesterday to another similar question. This is because of the risk that we must ensure that we will not impose further on the hospitals. As I said, I can understand their frustrations, but at this moment, Hong Kong is facing an unprecedented epidemic. At this point in time my first priority is to ensure that we could protect people in Hong Kong and also protect the public hospital system. To make any relaxation for arrivals which will run any risk in those respects is not something the Chief Executive would like to see. But I did say that after this wave subsides, we will take an overall look at border control, particularly for inbound arrivals, particularly for Hong Kong people who are now not allowed to come back because of the place-specific flight suspensions. We will try to map out a pathway for resuming this travel for people who want to come to Hong Kong.

I could not readily accept your accusations on two fronts. One is the Government was making U-turns on its anti-epidemic policies and practices. Second is Government officials were deliberately leaking information to the media or to the public in order to gauge reactions. On the first accusation, my response is like this: This is an unprecedented situation in terms of responding to an epidemic of this magnitude. It has outgrown the normal capacity of the Hong Kong SAR Government, or actually outgrown the capacity of Hong Kong. Where do we get all this manpower? Where do we get all these isolation facilities? Where do we get all these hospital beds? In a situation like this, any adjustments in policies or in practices are to enable Hong Kong to cope with the situation as best as we could, to enable us to protect the public hospital system but, at the same time, also to save lives. For example, we are now turning the Queen Elizabeth Hospital (QEH) into a designated hospital for COVID-19 patients. If you asked me three months ago, that was inconceivable. Why should QEH become a dedicated hospital? This could not be regarded as a U-turn. This is a timely adjustment in our policies in order to achieve the objective of protecting the safety and the health of the people of Hong Kong. I hope you understand that.

Unless you can produce the evidence that my senior colleagues or ministers were doing the deliberate leaking that you referred to, I could not accept this accusation. But never mind from now on. Two days ago, I started this daily press conference, so I am the authoritative source of anything that the Hong Kong SAR Government is doing in this fight against the epidemic. I would suggest that if you have any queries, you come to these daily conferences, you ask me, I give you a direct answer. But don't accuse my ministers. My ministers are all working very hard in fighting the epidemic. I do see some leakages but I could not trace the source of those leakages. I could tell you that I am as frustrated as some of you when there was Government information being leaked out, which should not be the case, and we will be as open and as transparent with the people of Hong Kong in order to instil the needed confidence in taking Hong Kong out of this major public health crisis. Thank you.

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

