

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 17). Also joining were the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, and the Chief Executive of the Hospital Authority, Dr Tony Ko. Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference:

Reporter: I'm just wondering, the number of imported cases is minuscule compared with the caseload in Hong Kong at the moment. Why do incoming travellers still have to quarantine in a hotel for 14 days when infected people in the city can stay at home for seven days? Would you be considering cutting the hotel quarantine for travellers to seven days? Also, what conditions would you need to see in order to revive contact tracing, and when do you expect that to happen? For example, is there a threshold for daily case numbers that need to be reached in order to do that, or are we just waiting for the outbreak to naturally abate, in which case it would feel more like living with the virus? And then finally, yesterday you said one of your three considerations when setting up a public health strategy was people's acceptance and tolerance to the measures. How do you measure people's acceptance and tolerance at the moment, and how close are we to the limits, perhaps, of people's tolerance? Thank you.

Chief Executive: Let me start by responding to the last bit of your question. Since the beginning of fighting the epidemic in January 2020, upon the advice of my experts, particularly Professor Gabriel Leung, we have accepted that it is not an exact science to devise our public health measures. I recall that I actually used a cartoon to show that it is a three-way tug of war. One is of course the very important public health consideration, because it is the job of the Government to protect the safety and the life of the people. The second is the economy, because there used to be a saying that what's the point of keeping me alive if my livelihood has been cut to a bare minimum? The third is people's acceptance and tolerance, because every public health measure requires people's co-operation, like vaccination, like coming forward for a test, like not going to the beaches, and so on. And I'm afraid that balancing these three factors again is not an exact science. I can't go out to do a research or crunch some numbers and say that the time has come for an optimum balance to be struck.

So, it is a very difficult job. I hope you have some sympathy for myself and the SAR Government. It's an extremely difficult job, especially when we are now in this unprecedented fifth wave, with unprecedented numbers of confirmed cases and unprecedented and very saddening numbers of deaths. But I think the time has come, and that's why I promise that instead of waiting for April 20, which was the original end period of the range of measures I announced on February 22 on the basis that the coming two months would be

critical, I think the time has come for the Government to have a mid-term review of all those measures announced on February 22, ranging from border controls such as flight bans, quarantine period for arrivals, to whether we are going to do the compulsory universal test and the resumption of face-to-face learning in schools and social-distancing measures. Just give me a little bit of time. When the one-month period comes, that is around March 20 or 21, I will give a comprehensive update on the situation. The reason why I think the time has come is not that the number of cases has come down significantly – they are actually now at the high-level plateau in public-health terms – but I have a very strong feeling that people's tolerance is fading.

I have a very good feel that some of our financial institutions are losing patience about this sort of isolated status of Hong Kong, and Hong Kong is an international financial centre. Nobody attaches as much importance as myself to Hong Kong's international status under "One Country, Two Systems". With that feedback given to me from various sectors and people, I will boldly take this step to update you on the mid-term about the future direction of some of those measures. But I should just mention that the seven-day (quarantine arrangement) at the moment works like this: The period for the quarantine order and the isolation order is still 14 days, but what the Centre for Health Protection has put in, which I think is a sensible move, is if you do an RAT, a rapid antigen test, on day six and day seven, if it turns out to be negative then you will be regarded as discharged and you can resume your normal living. In terms of consistency, there is a very strong basis for us to apply more or less the same rule to arrivals, but we just need a bit more time, because it's not a simple situation – since Hong Kong has so many cases, why should you ban people from other places which are less serious than Hong Kong from coming in? That is only one of the factors when we consider border controls. The other factor is the Hospital Authority. For example, if you have a flight coming in with 20, 30, 40 infected cases upon arrival, these people will have to be taken care of by Dr Ko (Chief Executive of the Hospital Authority (HA), Dr Tony Ko), so I have to take full account of the pressure on my HA colleagues in opening up the border again. But let me assure you that this is very much on my mind. I'm working it day and night to find the optimal solution for Hong Kong.

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

