

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 18). Also joining were the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, and the Head of the Policy Innovation and Co-ordination Office, Ms Doris Ho. Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference:

Reporter: I would like to ask about the two schemes that you have announced just now. Do they only cover for permanent residents or if people who came here with a visa, are they covered as well? The second question I will like to ask is, what's your expectation under these two schemes? Will the unemployment rate continue to rise like what you have just said, like the "tsunami" will continue to go on? Thank you.

Chief Executive: This scheme is intended to support employees through providing wage subsidies to their employers. We will not draw a distinction between the resident's status, ethnicity or background of the individuals. As I have mentioned, the distinction will be drawn on the basis of their industry. For certain business sectors which are not adversely affected by the COVID-19 epidemic, they will not be eligible. In fact, this is a very strong message given to us when we conducted the support scheme in 2020.

As far as the second question is concerned, I will invite the Secretary for Labour and Welfare to explain to you the impact of the 2020 ESS (Employment Support Scheme) on the overall employment or unemployment situation in Hong Kong.

Secretary for Labour and Welfare: To look at what the possible impact of the current proposal of the Employment Support Scheme would be, the best thing is to look back at the applications for the ESS in 2020. Just to recap, in the 2020 ESS, it was sort of covering the period from June to November 2020. You would probably remember the third wave of COVID-19 peaked around July and August 2020. Very likely because of the ESS, the unemployment rate was rather stable at that time at around 6.1 to 6.3 per cent, even though the peak of the third wave hit Hong Kong. After the end of the third wave, the fourth wave came around mid-November 2020. The ESS completed in November 2020, then the unemployment rate started to increase in December 2020, which peaked by February 2021, i.e. 7.2 per cent. The whole purpose of the ESS back at that time was trying to keep business afloat, so that when the epidemic subsided, the industries could revive very quickly. If you look at the figures, it clearly illustrates how quickly the economy picked up in 2021. As the Chief Executive just mentioned, in the announced figures for December 2020 – February 2021, the unemployment rate was 7.2 per cent. In 10 months' time, it dropped to 3.9 per cent for October – December 2021.

The best comparison is back in 2003 during the period of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome). In June 2003, the unemployment rate was 8.5 per cent for April – June 2003. To reduce by 3.3 percentage points, i.e. the same magnitude we had in 2021, it took two and a half years before the unemployment rate dropped down to 5.9 per cent for February – April 2005 (and then 5.2 per cent for October – December 2005). What it really tells us is that the rebound in 2021 was very quick. If you look at the impact of the ESS during the third wave, how much the businesses could uphold themselves and how they could recover very quickly after the fourth wave, it illustrates the importance of the ESS.

To highlight, the currently proposed ESS is slightly different because of the timing. If you remember, in 2020, when we started announcing the ESS, it was right after the second wave and before the third wave. We didn't know when the third wave would come, so the whole idea was to keep the businesses afloat; but it is slightly different now. Now, touch wood, if the peak of the fifth wave has already passed more than a week ago, it is the time now to think about how we can help the businesses rebuild and come back very quickly, as quickly as possible. So, the design as spelt out by the Chief Executive right now is to encourage them to increase their employment, because the amount of wage subsidies will depend on how many employees they will employ. That will help the businesses rebound far more quickly. This is what I would like to say.

Reporter: We surpassed a million cases today but many Hong Kongers are not reporting their positive COVID infections, citing a lack of awareness of the rules, jammed government hotlines, overloaded hospitals, or fear of quarantine or being separated from children. Meanwhile, the authorities have warned of arrest or fines for resisting isolation. Do you fear that the strict measures and warnings of arrest are disincentivising people from coming forward, and wouldn't this result in huge numbers of hidden cases? What's your message to those not reporting their infections? And second, you just said reporters have the freedom to ask any questions, and I think Hong Kongers do appreciate the support of Mainland medics, but yesterday a Now TV reporter was attacked by state-backed press and C Y for asking a perfectly normal question about medical accountability – one that was asked by Ming Pao, AM730, i-Cable, TVB. You've spoken of ensuring press freedom and better liaising with the media. Will you condemn the backlash and just reassure journalists that we can freely ask anything without fear of reprisals?

Chief Executive: About the situation of self-declaration or self-reporting as a result of people discovering that they are positive using the rapid antigen test (RAT), so far I'm actually amazed that people are very abiding. That's why you are still seeing a very large number of positive cases confirmed every day as a result of the RAT. The number now actually exceeds the number of cases arising from the PCR (polymerase chain reaction-based nucleic acid) tests. And the second point is people now realise that by declaring the RAT results as promptly as possible, they are contributing to the entire strategy to combat COVID-19, which will be of benefit to the whole society, because we'll then be able to move forward to relax the social distancing rules and children can go back to school. That's why I said just now that in the multi-

pronged approach to suppress this fifth wave, we will continue to appeal to people to use the RAT and to report promptly and to fill in the electronic form of the Centre for Health Protection so that the health people could properly assess whether an individual tested positive could go into the CIF, the community isolation facility, or they could be allowed to isolate at home and receive the home support package that we are providing for them. That was the situation. But having said that, it is incumbent upon us, as the Government and the law enforcement authority, to tell people that there is a legal basis – whether it is under a quarantine order or isolation of an infected case under an isolation order. All these are statutory documents issued under Cap. 599, that is the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance. If there are people blatantly refusing to comply, then isn't it incumbent upon the law-enforcement body to do something? But if you look at the figures of arrests or prosecutions, it's a very minute number because we still want to appeal to people's co-operation and civic responsibility in order to work with us to combat this unprecedented wave that we are now facing.

The second question, I feel it's a bit far-fetched to relate this single incident to the freedom of the press in Hong Kong. Freedom of the press in Hong Kong is safeguarded under the Basic Law. And the Hong Kong SAR Government and myself as the Chief Executive, we attach importance to upholding the freedom of the press as well as the freedom of individuals and so on. I would really make this very strong personal appeal to the people of Hong Kong and also to our media friends: It is no easy task for these medical, nursing and allied support professionals to come to Hong Kong, because they all have a job in a medical institution in Guangdong, they all have a family that they want to see every night, but now they are putting down all these personal aspirations and rush to Hong Kong to help us save lives. Their working conditions are really not satisfactory. They're not working in a proper hospital, they're working in a makeshift hospital called the AWE (AsiaWorld-Expo) community treatment facility. They are doing it in a closed loop. They can only commute by designated buses every day between the hotel and the AWE community treatment facility. Using their Mainland, very stringent public health and infection control standards, they have to work four hours in heavy gear non-stop, without even going to the toilet. I was told that four hours are maximum tolerance of a human being in that sort of gear. Why do we want to make all this fuss and make divisive comments between the Hong Kong medical personnel and the Mainland medical personnel? So please, you can ask questions to understand more about their deployment, their contribution and maybe their feelings in time to come, but don't make it into another political issue or relate it to media freedom and so on. Hong Kong is as free a society as we would like to see, so there are a lot of people who've been making a lot of comments. I have been the target of a lot of comments made by opinion leaders, politicians and former colleagues from time to time, but this is the beauty of Hong Kong – everybody has the right to express their view. But we have to put all those views in context, and the Government has the first duty to explain and to point out the facts, and to dispel any rumours or accusations. Thank you.

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

