

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

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, held a press conference this afternoon (January 14). Also joining were the Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr John Lee; the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan; the Director of Health, Dr Ronald Lam; and the Head of the Human Resources Planning and Poverty Co-ordination Unit of the Chief Secretary for Administration's Private Office, Ms Angelina Kwan. Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference:

Reporter: Good evening. First of all, can we trust the Government this time that the social distancing rules will be lifted by February 3, because a lot of businesses are hopping on that to be resumed? What is the threshold for opening such premises and can these businesses operate under a "vaccine bubble" even if there are still some local cases by then? And today's banner says we want to resume travel as well, but it's really difficult for people to believe that, given that there are 150 countries of high risk and eight countries banned altogether at this point. So will this have any impact on Hong Kong's cargo flights and cargo logistics at this point, and what can you do to guarantee that these flight bans will be eased and flights will be resumed in a gradual manner to Hong Kong? A third question is on schools. You didn't mention schools today so far, so how long will schools have to shut and what is the vaccine requirement for children aged under 12 after the Chinese New Year? Thank you.

Chief Executive: All right, three questions altogether. The first general response is I'm afraid nobody could give any guarantee in a public health crisis like this. No one could guarantee whether we will have another dangerous variant after Omicron. The health authorities in every government are trying their very, very best to fight the pandemic in order to protect their people. Hong Kong has been fighting COVID-19 for exactly two years, and we have managed to protect our people. As I have just quoted, in terms of the total number of confirmed cases, we were behind over 170 countries globally; in terms of confirmed cases per 1 million population and fatalities per 1 million population, we are only 4 per cent of the global average, let alone when compared with the USA or European countries. We have been doing our very best, but no one could give a guarantee because this virus is changing, and changing quite rapidly from one variant to another variant.

Apart from that general response, I would say that in terms of social distancing measures on this occasion, we have listened to what the trade has told us, that they want a little bit more certainty. Previously, we just rolled out the social distancing measures for 14 days, and another 14 days, or even without an end date. This has created a lot of anxiety and uncertainties for the trade. Now that we are in a situation better than the

fourth wave because of vaccination – and I hope to see the vaccination rate to go up, say to over 80 or close to 90 per cent – that would give us a better basis to now foretell that by then, after the expiry of the second 14 days, we may be able to allow these premises to start operating again under a "vaccine bubble". In other words, their staff and customers have to be vaccinated before they can go into their premises. But again there is no guarantee, because if the Omicron variant has given rise to a major outbreak in Hong Kong, then I don't think the Hong Kong population would support us to blindly lift the social distancing measures and put our people at risk. That is the situation.

About resuming travel, of course we want to resume travel with the Mainland and resume travel with the rest of the world. Since we have attained zero local infection, that is no local infection for a very long time, we have to be very vigilant in ensuring we are not importing cases. When you look around the world, they have two million, three million cases every day. We should be worried about allowing more travellers coming from those places, and hence we are putting countries under Group A or enhanced Group A, on which we will put even more restrictions. That will certainly have a major impact on many aspects of Hong Kong. It's not just the cargo. Cargo flow is more affected by the latest imposition of stringent measures on the airlines. Without travelling or quarantine-free arrangement for overseas arrivals, that of course affects Hong Kong – being an international city, an international financial centre and a business hub, with investors coming in, and the organisation of major events and concerts and art shows and so on. We know very well there are consequences, but we have to weigh these consequences against the health risks to the people of Hong Kong, because these viruses could kill people. If you look at the world, hundreds of people are still dying in European countries nowadays, and I have my utmost duty to protect the health of the Hong Kong people. Cargo flights will be affected by the latest measures because of non-compliance by a couple of crew people, and as a result of that I have already warned that there will be a shortage of cargo flights, which means that there will be a significant drop in cargoes and goods being brought in by air, and I have noticed that many people are already commenting that that sort of situation will shortly emerge in Hong Kong.

About schools, we have only suspended face-to-face learning in kindergartens, child care centres and primary schools, from Primary One to Primary Six. We will try our very best, and by now I think we could confidently say that we will allow secondary schools to operate face-to-face learning until they have their Chinese New Year holiday. After the Chinese New Year holiday, of course we would like to see schools resuming their face-to-face learning, but again there could be no guarantee because much would depend on what will happen in the next two to three weeks in Hong Kong's COVID-19 situation. Applying vaccination to young children is a stated government policy – I mentioned it earlier this week. So we will, after Chinese New Year, especially when school children go back to school, arrange school-based outreach vaccination teams to apply vaccination to children from five to 11 years old in schools. But we will not go that far to make vaccination a prerequisite for going back to school, because education is a

right of the child. We will honour the child's right to be educated at school, but we will do all our best to encourage and promote vaccination amongst young children for their own sake.

Thank you.

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

