

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

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, held a press conference on anti-epidemic measures this morning (March 23). Also joining was the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung. Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference:

Reporter: Morning. First of all, is reopening the border with the Mainland still a priority of the Hong Kong Government, given that the mass testing is now put aside? And is there a timetable for it? Secondly, about flights and designated hotels, Cathay Pacific said that due to Hong Kong's, for today, flight-specific suspension mechanism, they can only schedule one flight per route every two weeks, even after the Government lifted the flight ban. Would you consider relaxing or even cancelling the current mechanism? If not, why? And about the quarantine hotels, we see that most of those hotels only have rooms in May, will there be more hotels added to the list and how many designated hotels and rooms can be provided in total? And lastly, also about the compulsory notice, experts said earlier that there was actually little point in it as the infection surged across the city, so why did the Government has to resume the arrangements instead of relying on the rapid test? And what do we expect the effectiveness of it? Thank you.

Chief Executive: There are a total of four questions. I try to answer them one by one. Reopening the border with the Mainland, or more accurately, securing some form of quarantine-free travel into the Mainland remains a top priority. This is not only the top priority of the Hong Kong SAR Government, this is a top priority dictated by Hong Kong's social and economic development because Hong Kong prospers as a regional hub. To a certain extent or to a very great extent, it is because of her accessibility to this huge Mainland market, and her connectivity with various parts of the Mainland. There's a very strong economic need for this sort of facilitated travel or resumption of travel into the Mainland China. It's also a social development need because there are so many connections amongst the people of Hong Kong with the Mainland. There are people who are living in Shenzhen, working in Hong Kong; there are students living in Shenzhen and coming across the border to go to school, let alone that there are a lot of relatives between the two places. I can make it very clear that resumption of travel into the Mainland remains a top priority and my Government will spare no effort to achieve that objective by meeting certain prerequisites.

It is not possible to give you a timetable now because we need to make sure that the fifth wave will subside as soon as possible. And then we will restore some of the basis for resumption of travel, on which we actually have reached a very advanced stage of discussion with the Mainland authorities in the last quarter of last year. If you go back to check the record, we started

some interactions or discussions with the Mainland experts in September last year. They came down to look at how we tackled the epidemic, how we put in place the infection control measures, how we did the border control at the airport and so on. By December last year, we were actually very close to announcing certain arrangements for the people of Hong Kong to go into the Mainland. But unfortunately, this fifth wave hit us. We will resume all those discussions once the conditions permit.

The second question is about the lifting of the flight ban. Let me say it again, this is not a relaxation in border control measures as some people have put it. We are still subjecting arrivals, now Hong Kong residents, to very stringent quarantine requirements, which are no longer adopted in most parts of the world; and by the way, they have to be Hong Kong residents, we are not allowing non-Hong Kong residents to come to Hong Kong yet after the lifting of the flight ban. These Hong Kong residents who wish to come back to Hong Kong have to be fully vaccinated, that is two doses, and prior to boarding the flight they have to have a negative PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test result. Upon arrival at the Hong Kong International Airport, they have to undergo another PCR test and if the result is negative, they will take designated transport to go to a pre-booked designated quarantine hotel with a 14-day quarantine order. Like other people of Hong Kong, there will be a discharge arrangement if they manage to have RAT (rapid antigen test) negative results on Days 6 and 7, then they could be discharged. These are very stringent quarantine requirements in order to ensure that we are keeping the virus out from our community under what we call the border control measures.

Since my announcement two days ago, I have received a lot of feedback. They welcomed very much this lifting of the flight ban or what I described as the rationalisation of our quarantine arrangements, but they pointed out two problems as you have asked. One is whether there will be enough flights to come back to Hong Kong because we still have the flight-specific suspension mechanism in place. That is, if an inbound flight takes in a certain number of COVID-19 positive cases upon arrival, then it will not be allowed to fly again for a period of two weeks. This is going to limit the number of flights inbound. I can only say that we know the problem and we are looking into how we could resolve this without compromising our border control measures.

The second thing they need is, of course, a hotel, because we are not allowing people arriving to isolate at home. They have to be isolated at a designated quarantine hotel. Prior to boarding the plane they have to show that they have pre-booked a designated quarantine hotel in Hong Kong for seven nights. I told you on Monday that the latest count is we had 25 designated quarantine hotels, about 6 500 rooms. We are working very hard. I hope to be able to tell you a higher figure soon. My colleagues are working with the hotels to encourage them to perform the role of a designated quarantine hotel. You remember earlier on I had a webinar with the hotel industry and many of them have come forward to provide hotels as a CIF, a community isolation facility. But now that we have the Central Government's support and we have started to put in place all these "fangcang" as the CIF units, we will reassess the situation, and if possible, we will invite those

hotels to transform into a designated quarantine hotel. There will be a greater supply of designated quarantine hotels for Hong Kong residents who want to come back.

About the resumption of CTN, that is a compulsory testing notice, yesterday, both PCR and RAT as COVID-19 testing are equally important, because we want to know the epidemic situation in Hong Kong for the public health purpose and for the purpose of devising public health measures. We want to identify as early as possible the people in Hong Kong who are infected, but they don't know because a large percentage of Omicron-infected cases are asymptomatic. It is only through testing that we could identify these people and suitably either isolate them or treat them and in order to suppress the continuous spread of the virus in community. I was actually a bit surprised that some people, especially some people in the medical arena, are so skeptical about testing. Testing has been recognised as the effective measure from day one in fighting the epidemic and I'm sure it will continue to play an extremely essential role in any public health crisis in future. Between the RAT, that is a rapid antigen test, and a PCR test, there is no doubt that the PCR test has higher sensitivity and is far more accurate. But at the same time, yes, because of the widespread of this Omicron variant and we have accepted the use of rapid antigen tests and self-declaration as a sort of positive cases. Since we have the capacity with the ramped-up laboratories in Hong Kong, I certainly think that we should be far more proactive and undertake more PCR tests in order to assess the situation. This is what we are going to do from now on because the capacity is available. I'm sure we want to find out more people who are infected and we also have a lot more isolation facilities and a very clear tiered mechanism to identify those infected who should go to a CIF and those who could be allowed to be isolated at home. We're working very hard so I don't see why we should not do what we have been doing and doing quite effectively in the past two years. Thank you.

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

