

Transcript of remarks of press conference (with photo/video)

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, held a press conference this afternoon (February 5). Also joining were the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Edward Yau; the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong; the Secretary for Security, Mr John Lee; the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan; the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan; the Director of Health, Dr Constance Chan; and the Chief Port Health Officer of the Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health, Dr Leung Yiu-hong. Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference.

Reporter: Thank you. Hello again, Mrs Lam. Could I ask you please to answer this general political question? Aren't you open to the accusation of always running behind this outbreak that if you had acted sooner, then Hong Kong would have been safer? And how worried are you now – the direction of this outbreak in this territory might end up with Hong Kong being in the same kind of isolation trouble that the Mainland of China is? Two American airlines have already cancelled flights. Taiwan, the Philippines are, you know, closing their borders to you. So how worried are you that this might well end up with Hong Kong in isolation? Thank you.

Chief Executive: First of all, as I have said in my introductory remarks, since we were first notified of this virus in the last month or so, we have been very vigilant in monitoring the situation, taking into account the advice of my in-house experts as well as external experts who were subsequently appointed to the Chief Executive's expert advisory panel towards the latter part of January. We have taken into account all these factors in making sure that the strategy remains one to prevent and to reduce the chances of this infection in Hong Kong and also to adopt the measures which are most needed at every stage of the situation, because the situation changed, as the Director of Health has just explained to you. So it is not entirely appropriate to say that one was behind or one was ahead of the various timelines in order to introduce the effective measures.

The second thing is about whether I am worried or we are worried. I suppose everybody in Hong Kong should be worried about the situation in Hong Kong. In my concluding remarks just now, I made a strong appeal that, first, let's have confidence in Hong Kong. We have a very robust public health system, we have excellent medical and health personnel. I should add that we also have adequate public resources and we have a population which has gone through several of these infectious diseases, so they should be more alert to the various precautionary measures that the Centre for Health Protection has asked them to comply with. This is a time really for social cohesion for getting our act together in order to fight this disease.

One of my expert advisers was a former Assistant Director-General of the

World Health Organization, Professor Fukuda. In my meeting with him over this period, especially yesterday, he made a very strong point that in every society, every community, in order to combat a public health crisis, it requires society to put aside their differences in order to act together. You can imagine if we roll out one measure after another, including controlling the border points, reducing traffic or now going for mandatory quarantine, if members of the community refuse to comply or refuse to adopt the various precautionary measures and still want to go out and interact, that would create difficulties for our fight against this disease. I remain optimistic that with the favourable circumstances, the experience that we have gained in the past, that we should be able to fight this together. But here I make another very sincere appeal that this is really the time for us to put aside our differences to act together in order to overcome this public health crisis.

Reporter: Mrs Lam, do you think that your way of tackling the virus is more reactive than proactive and preventive, and how exactly are you going to quarantine potentially tens of thousands of people coming back from the Mainland? And why do you think that this would be a more effective and feasible way of tackling the outbreak of the virus than closing the border completely? And secondly, just yesterday you said that officials can only wear masks when necessary, and I see that some officials present here today are wearing masks and some are not wearing masks. Can you explain why?

Chief Executive: I forgot to answer your second question when it was asked by another reporter friend here. In our internal guidelines and also in guidelines issued by the World Health Organization or by our own Centre for Health Protection, there are circumstances which individuals are advised to wear surgical masks, so it is not a complete ban on wearing of masks. There are circumstances that the advice is to put on a surgical mask, including if that individual is unwell. I'm sorry to see that several of my colleagues are unwell and of course, there may be a case that because they are in frequent interactions in a health setting, so even if they are not unwell, because I've not checked Dr Leung whether he is unwell now, that puts him into that sort of circumstances that he should wear a surgical mask. I think we are acting consistently with the guidelines that we have adopted not only for the Government but for the general population.

The first question about the way that we are tackling this public health situation, as I have said, the public health situation or this virus infection situation is evolving all the time. It started off with something which is entirely unknown, so even in early January when we amended or when we made a regulation under the Prevention and Control of Diseases Ordinance, we didn't even know that it is coronavirus. We just put in a term to try to describe this very unknown virus that was hitting the Mainland of China and also Hong Kong and other places all over the world. The situation is one that is evolving, so our strategy is really to monitor very closely the situation, taking into account the scientific evidence, the expert advice of my in-house colleagues as well as external experts and to devise the most suitable strategy and measures that will help us to tackle the situation. We have not shied away from introducing these effective measures, so you may remember

that on one occasion, I think two days ago, I said you should not be surprised if you would be seeing me again within a very short period of time because we need to have a speedy response to the changing circumstances. I don't want to particularly describe how well my Government has been doing, but certainly we are acting in accordance with a strategy which is to protect the safety and the health of Hong Kong.

Reporter: Mrs Lam, you highlighted the need to reduce contacts in the community and you announced earlier that civil servants will work from home until February 9. It's only a few days away from that day. Will you extend further that arrangement? And second question is, a friend of my colleague, who is a public hospital doctor, said the isolation ward in Princess Margaret Hospital had been occupied. Are there any other measures the Government is going to adopt to handle this? Thank you.

Chief Executive: Thank you very much for the question. Yes, we need to enhance social distancing as this is one of the important strategies, now especially we are seeing some community-based infection. I am not yet in a position to announce the exact arrangements for civil service after this week, but it is likely that we will have to extend it, but again it is a matter of balancing because many people in Hong Kong or many operation of businesses still require some very essential and basic services. But as I now see it, because I said the next two weeks will be rather critical, so there is a high chance that we will have to extend this work-from-home arrangement and we will announce it as soon as possible.

As far as the isolation ward in Princess Margaret Hospital, in fact it is not just isolation ward. The Hospital Authority has been under extreme pressure in almost everything, in terms of facilities, manpower, and supplies in the protective equipment including surgical masks. So we are doing whatever the Hospital Authority needs, to help them to overcome this shortage, and that's why I really make an appeal that staff of the Hospital Authority at this very critical juncture and very challenging times should continue to support the Hospital Authority as well as other healthcare professionals who are now working so hard in order to ensure the provision of services. But whether we have very specific proposals to tackle the isolation facilities, I'll see whether Professor Chan has something to add to that.

Secretary for Food and Health: As far as the current isolation facilities are concerned, the occupancy is about 40 per cent. Other than the Princess Margaret Hospital's ID Block, i.e. the Infectious Disease Block, there are also other isolation facilities in a number of hospitals under the seven clusters of the Hospital Authority. This is something that obviously the Hospital Authority is looking at, by almost real-time monitoring to see how they can work towards tackling the increasing number of cases. On the other hand, in order to relieve the capacity of the Hospital Authority, in particular the Accident and Emergency Departments, they are quite ready to embark on the running of the designated clinics because we are seeing cases in the community that may not have previous travel history. There may be cases of infections in the community already. In order to further reduce the risk or community transmission, it is important for the Hospital Authority to

continue to contain the situation and have an early identification of the cases. The designated clinics will be tackling cases of milder situation so as to allow the hospitals especially the Accident and Emergency Departments to treat and deal with the more severe cases and also the suspected cases. The objective of designated clinics would be able to find or identify some of these cases in the community that may have the virus, so as to reduce the risk of community transmission. We will be having more details for all of you about the designated clinics. The Hospital Authority is ready, but then we would have to look into when is the best time to execute or start the running of the designated clinics. We will be having further information tomorrow.

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

