

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

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, held a press conference this afternoon (May 5). Also joining were the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Edward Yau; the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan; the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung; the Secretary for Innovation and Technology, Mr Alfred Sit; the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Caspar Tsui; and the Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury, Mr Christopher Hui. Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference.

Reporter: Hi, Mrs Lam. Will the Government consider a Harbin style of lockdown, given that after they have detected several imported cases and they carried out a city lockdown? And as you've mentioned that you will be lifting and relaxing on social distancing measures, given there may be a future relaxation on border control, under what circumstances will the Government consider another wave of tightening social distancing measures?

Chief Executive: First of all, Hong Kong has never gone into a stage of a complete city lockdown. In some of the European countries where they practise a city lockdown, residents are simply not allowed to leave their home, except for some very essential purposes, but we have never adopted that practice. In fact, many renowned experts are now trying to study our situation, why do Hong Kong succeed in keeping the confirmed cases at a low level without drastic measures like the complete city lockdown, and I do think that it is a very interesting topic for further research.

To answer your question of when we may need to go back to some more tighter social distancing measures, of course this depends on the situation of the infection. The strategy that Hong Kong has been adopting and advocated by some of our experts is what we call a "suppress and lift" strategy. In light of the number of confirmed cases and the likelihood of the spread of the disease in a community, we will have to suppress in order to make sure that there will be no surge in the number of confirmed cases as we have seen in some neighboring regions. But when the situation of the infection stabilises, that is the time for lifting – that is loosening a bit so that society can operate more normally, especially for the business and for individuals' behavior. We are now right in the stage of lifting because we don't have a local case for 16 days already and the number of imported cases is very low, and we are now quite confident that the system of testing and holding that we have put in place for all arrivals from overseas would enable us to control the number of imported cases, so this is the time for lifting, and this afternoon we have announced a number of lifting measures.

Of course, if the situation continues to stay at the current level, no local cases, very few imported cases, then at the end of the 14-day period – that is May 22 – will be the time for more relaxation. On the other hand, if

the situation turns a bit more tricky with suddenly a local case surfacing, then we will have to go back, maybe, to some suppression measures. That's why we said that we really have to monitor the situation very closely in order to take the necessary and pertinent response measures.

Reporter: Thank you, Mrs Lam. On the social distancing rules that some of the measures you are relaxing, the public gathering number that's being doubled to eight, and I think for the bars you said they would re-open but there is no music or dancing. Can you sort of explain the thinking behind that because at the moment it seems a bit arbitrary, was there any scientific basis for that? Secondly, on class resumption, maybe for the education secretary, is it a bit premature to be planning for class resumption, especially when only yesterday, the CHP was saying it's a bit too early to conclude that the local transmission chain has been broken at this stage? And finally, on masks, we're seeing more plentiful supply in the market now, how are you going to make sure that the most needy in society, the underprivileged, are able to get those masks first, especially if maybe they don't have ready access to the Internet?

Chief Executive: There are a few questions. I will try to answer some and then leave the Secretary for Education to deal with the resumption of classes. First, we have to understand this particular virus. Many researchers and scientists are still struggling to understand more about the transmission of this disease and as you know, we have yet to have a vaccine – an effective one – that will help to create immunity for the people. So with that context, I think it would not be very realistic to say that we need very tight social distancing and border control measures until we see that there are no cases at all or no local cases at all. This is not very realistic because if you remember the analogy that I drew – a three-way tug of war – on one hand, we have the public health concern; the second, on the other hand, we have this economic impact of this border control and social distancing measures; and thirdly is the tolerance and the patience of the people which is all for you to see over this four-day long weekend. People were becoming very impatient, especially when the weather was good, they all rushed out to enjoy themselves. It is unrealistic for the Government to insist that we need to keep social distance because there are still some cases in society. I just want to give the proper context for us to understand these measures. You will not reach very easily that situation where everything is clean; there are no cases whatsoever.

About the supply of mask, I have outlined six measures to distribute masks freely to the people of Hong Kong and of course in so doing, we will take special account of the disadvantaged, the elderly, the street sleepers. Apart from being a member of the Hong Kong population whereby they will receive their reusable masks and they will receive their disposable masks, we have this mask distribution programme, together with a large number of non-governmental organisations, charity groups and self-help groups. We will continue to work with them to distribute another three million masks, which were donated to us. And I am announcing that if we run out of donated masks, but there is still a need from these disadvantaged groups, we will take the government masks, the masks that we procure, supposed for our own use, to

share with the needy groups in society, so that's a way to ensure that in a public health situation that we are now in, the needs of the disadvantaged groups will be fully taken care of.

Again, you may remember that I have said that in deciding when to lift and how much to lift, it is not an exact science. I hope it is an exact science, so I don't need to use my judgement and run the risk, especially political risk, of being attacked, but it is not an exact science. We have to take a large number of factors into account, which I have just shared with you. Raising the number from four to eight both for the catering business and also for the prohibition against group gathering under Cap 599G, it is not an exact science, but this is a step in the right direction of relaxation. Maybe in another 14 days' time, we will raise the number eight to 10, to 12, to 15, and so on. For example in France, the limit now is not more than 10. We feel that that is a prudent way of relaxing the control measures that we have put in place.

As far as the bar and the pub, I have to confess that this is one of the difficult areas to decide because bars and pubs come in different forms, as long as they have a liquor license, and almost all of them will have also a food licence. You have stand-alone bars, and you have also bars in a restaurant, whether it's Chinese or Western restaurant, so hitherto, the ban is whenever there is an area exclusively for serving alcoholic drinks, it has to be closed. If it is a pure stand-alone bar, then it has to be closed, there is no business whatsoever. But if it is a bar area in a Western restaurant, yes, the bar area will be closed, but wines will continue to be served on the premises where people have food. Taking that into account and the public health situation, the low number of the cases and so on, we have decided that perhaps to strike a pragmatic balance is to allow them to re-open for business but to put in far more stringent requirements, including the requirements that you have referred to. That is, yes, you can sit down, four a table, to drink, but there should be no live music, no band performance, and no dancing in the bar premises, and that would be another way to keep the social distance and prevent as much as possible physical interactions.

I now invite the Secretary for Education to answer about the class resumption.

Secretary for Education: You asked whether it is a bit premature to announce class resumption today. But actually we are not announcing class resumption right away. We are giving an advance notice of about three weeks for all stakeholders to get prepared for the school resumption. The first day is May 27, so during this period we will of course continue to monitor the situation, and if really necessary, we could adjust the resumption plan. But at this stage, we are still pretty confident that we should be able to resume classes on May 27.

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

