

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

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, held a press conference this afternoon (November 30). Also joining were the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan; the Permanent Secretary for Food and Health (Health), Mr Thomas Chan; the Director of Health, Dr Constance Chan; and the Chief Executive of the Hospital Authority, Dr Tony Ko, Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference.

Reporter: You've repeatedly said that infection control measures should be taken quickly, so why didn't the Government tighten these restrictions last week when the number of confirmed cases was clearly picking up? Secondly, you talked about the plan to increase the amount of fine for breaching some of the infection control measures. Why do you think there is a need to step up these penalties? Would you consider imposing a jail sentence for these offences? Thirdly, you also talked about setting up a hotline for people to report breaches of the social distancing measures. Do you think that it would be healthy for people to live in a society where people constantly monitor one another? Are you worried that people may abuse the system?

Chief Executive: Three questions. First of all, I have explained that this new wave of COVID-19 has hit Hong Kong very quickly, from around November 19 or 20, and every day we have been monitoring the situation. We have already announced measures that we have adopted in the past to deal with this pandemic. I wouldn't say that we have reacted too slowly. If you ask me, individual measures have been introduced in the same manner, or even in an accelerated manner than the previous wave, if you take individual measures. We are now closing almost everything except the restaurants because they are meeting the daily needs of the people. We are allowing a little bit of gym activities because people need this sort of thing to keep themselves healthy, whether it is physically or mentally. If I may just make a plea, it's very easy for an observer to say after the event that you should have done this earlier. If you are in the midst of the pandemic, you have to assess the situation and you have to introduce measures based on science and effectiveness, and of course the ability to undertake those measures.

The second thing about fine. Why do we need a fine? This is a very good question. If everybody is very concerned about the health of themselves, of Hong Kong people; if everybody wants to eradicate this wave as soon as possible, there is no need for any fines. People will self-behave, or self-discipline. Unfortunately, and maybe to a certain extent understandably, because of the fatigue associated with this prolonged period of pandemic – it's now almost one year – you have seen, - I have seen, reporters have taken a lot of photos and put on their front pages about Hong Kong people ignoring the various regulations. They went out in groups, they did not wear their mask, they continued to enjoy themselves in parties. Even if party rooms were closed, they went to other private places to have parties. They danced in

close contact. That is when we decided that perhaps the \$2,000 fine at the moment does not serve the purpose of deterring people from this sort of activities, so we need to raise the fine. You can see in other places they also resort to fines. Fortunately, we have not seen some of the reactions that we have seen in some European cities, that is, people got so fed up that they went out to protest on human rights grounds, that they no longer accept the Government's restrictions on social distancing. I don't think Hong Kong will reach that stage. I still have confidence that the great majority of Hong Kong people are very sensible and very pragmatic. They want to help control this pandemic. But for some, you still need some instruments to deter them from doing this sort of behaviour.

A hotline is a hotline. The Government has all sorts of hotlines for members of the public to shoulder their civic responsibility to tell government departments that they suspect there are certain irregularities going on here and there. Then they report to us. Our enforcement colleagues will go there to investigate and to see whether there is indeed an irregularity that requires some actions to be taken. I hope people will not overreact. This is not sort of monitoring people and so on. People are jointly shouldering part of the responsibility, given the very serious pandemic situation that we are now facing. Thank you.

Secretary for Food and Health: Thank you, Chief Executive. I want to supplement in terms of the restrictions or tightening of social distancing measures. If you remember way back in September, we have already alerted the public that in winter there will be another wave coming, and that is something what we probably cannot avoid and is inevitable. So, we have been all along, together with the Department of Health and also the Hospital Authority, been preparing for something coming in winter. That's number one. Secondly, we talk about in November (when we) started (tightening the measures) even before the dancing groups have come into notice by the Department of Health. Since November 14 till now, this is already the fourth time that we are tightening the social distancing measures. We have (announced to) tighten the social distancing measures on November 14, 21 and 24. We are trying to be sophisticated and precise in terms of our social distancing measures. But, in terms of preparing for this wave, not only are we doing social distancing measures, we are also building our capacity, for example, in testing. That's why we are now rolling out different community testing centres, four (centres) in phase one, and then five (more centres). We will be rolling out further testing centres in the community, so that we can expand our testing. And also for border control measures, they are as important as restricting movement in the community because we want to prevent imported cases from bringing virus into the community. So, again, if you notice in the past few weeks, we have been issuing notices and we have been (adopting) different measures in tightening our border control measures. Thank you.

Reporter: Hi, Mrs Lam. Firstly, can I ask you about, you have asked for the tolerance of the general public to support the raft of measures that you've introduced today, and you've said that some of the measures are going back to the toughest period that we've seen before, in July for example, would you

also offer the same amount of support – the maximum level of support to citizens who are following your policies, like closing down of premises etc? And perhaps give them the third round of Employment Support Scheme that people are facing with this policy? If not, what do you think the economic cost to them would be? Secondly, given some research has shown that the fourth wave of the epidemic has been caused by a new strain of virus being brought by travellers coming back from Nepal, who may have been quarantining at home, and also the fact that some dance studios were not actually covered in the original (Cap.599F) scheduled premises, do you feel you bear any responsibility for this oversight and for allowing this situation to happen, in other words, for the fourth wave that has come today? Thirdly, can I also ask you if it is still your intention to reopen borders with Mainland China in the New Year, given the latest situation? And given the latest situation, would you actually consider, for example, stopping Return2hk Scheme and stopping the flow of people from Mainland China and Macao without quarantine, in order to further curb the epidemic? Thank you.

Chief Executive: Thank you for the three questions. First question, I have actually answered. Since February this year, that is since the 2020-21 Budget and the three rounds of Anti-Epidemic Fund measures, the Government has already committed some \$310 billion, that is over 10 per cent of our Gross Domestic Product. The Financial Secretary is projecting a deficit of over \$300 billion this year. The public finance situation is equally very dire, as in the case of the pandemic situation. We fully understand the economic trauma experienced by some of the sectors, for example tourism, that's why I have offered in my 2020 Policy Address about \$600 million to help the tourism sector, which has no business for over a year. It is not just COVID-19, they have not had businesses since the social unrest last year, so after a lot of soul-searching, we have identified this being the most hard-hit sector we will need to help. But at the moment, as I said, we are more focused on tackling the COVID-19 pandemic, we have no plans yet to do another round of relief measures which will incur quite significant public sector expenditure.

About the cause of the fourth wave or the cause of any outbreak in society, there are a lot of reasons, but I hope you understand that Hong Kong is not being singled out as a city that continuously face a wave after wave. Globally, I think we are still in the worst situation – “we” means the world except our country, Mainland China and Macao. The world is facing a worsening situation continuously. I think it has now been over 60 million cases and many cities in Europe have gone into complete city lockdown again, so your same question could be pointed to all those country government leaders. To be fair to Hong Kong, we are not doing bad at all. If you look at some of the statistics in terms of number of people confirmed per one million population, we are about 800; globally, that figure is about 8 000. Compared to the world, we are nine over 10 better if you put it that way. In terms of death, we are about 15 per one million population. If you look at the US, if you look at the UK and other countries, we are only a fraction of that. And on top of that, we manage through our strategy to allow the city to continue to operate. We never have a complete lockdown or “stay home” that creates a huge trauma on the economy and on individuals. I think as reporters you too should feel that we are not doing bad and you should promote that Hong Kong after

all is not doing bad. Because we are such an open and free society, we cannot seal off the airport and the land borders for Hong Kong people not to come back. Now I got another wave of Hong Kong students who need to come back. Can I deny them from coming back? What will be the local reaction if they are not allowed to come back? All these are very practical issues that any government or any government leader has to seriously consider.

My message to you is Hong Kong is not doing bad. Please bear that in mind and try to tell exactly the Hong Kong story. But we can do better. I have said many times that in fighting an epidemic, there is no perfect solution. We need to continue to find the best solution to deal with the situation of the day. And now when we saw that the fourth wave was here and was likely to get worse – it's actually not as bad as late July yet when we have a peak of 148 cases a day – but with the anticipation of the worsening of situation, we should go back to the tight, the toughest measures that we have ever introduced. When you talk about the dance studios, everybody could rent a place in Hong Kong and start some dance tutorials. I am afraid we do not have a regulatory regime, but after this COVID-19, we may. I may ask for research and review on whether we should further regulate such activities happening in some of the premises. If you ask yourself, if there is one case of infection, either imported or local that has gone into community, if every member of community sticks to the rules of wearing a mask, no close contact, no social gathering and stays home as far as possible, we would not have seen this major cluster involving over 500 confirmed cases and more to come. So, do you want to blame the Hong Kong people as well? Let's face it. Now is not the time for argument. Now is not the time for blaming which party. This is a time for solidarity. This is a time for working together and make sure that Hong Kong will face the least trauma in this round of the pandemic.

On the final question, again, I have said on many occasions that we should build our strategy and measures on the basis of science. The Mainland of China and Macao are now almost free of cases, such a vast country has only a dozen of imported cases and episodic isolated cases here and there which they manage to stamp out in pretty short time. If you look at science, I have quoted you many figures previously. We have Cap. 599C which imposes quarantine orders on people from Mainland, Macao and Taiwan. We have a Cap. 599E imposing the same quarantine arrangement on people from overseas for nine to 10 months now. Over 300 000 quarantine orders have been issued for people coming in from Mainland China and Macao under Cap. 599C. Not a single confirmed case has been identified. This is very good scientific evidence that that place is very safe. When that place is very safe and we have thousands of Hong Kong people who have been stranded for months who want to come back to see a doctor to refill their drugs and to do some essential personal things, could I be that heartless to turn them away when the science is for them to come in? So, we have arranged for this scheme for them to come in but under certain precautions. They still have to get a negative COVID-19 test and we allow them to come in. My latest information is over 5 000 Hong Kong people have benefited from that measure, which means at least 5 000 families have addressed some of their problems because of the separation. For all of us sitting here as government officials, any decision we take is taken in the public interest for the people of Hong Kong. There is no question of

suspecting that we were doing otherwise. Thank you very much.

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

