

Transcript of remarks of press conference

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, held a press conference this afternoon (January 28). Also joining were 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 Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Edward Yau; the Director of Immigration, Mr Tsang Kwok-wai; the Commissioner of Customs and Excise, Mr Hermes Tang; 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: Chief Executive, you said that public safety is your primary concern, yet when you laid out your measures that you're taking they only sound like half measures. Are you putting Hong Kongers' lives at risk by not closing the border?

Chief Executive: I have explained at length what we mean by closing the border. Hong Kong has at least 14 border control points for various passenger flows between Hong Kong and overseas as well as the Mainland, and as I have demonstrated with some of the figures, 75 per cent of the passenger flows through the control points, at least up to January 27, were Hong Kong people. Closing these control points means that we do not allow Hong Kong people to come back. There are a large number of Hong Kong residents who are now travelling in the Mainland and overseas and they need to come back, so I don't think it is very meaningful to talk about a complete closure of the border control points. The strategy that we have laid out this afternoon is to try to drastically limit population mobility, especially between Hong Kong and the Mainland of China, through various measures. I try to repeat in a very precise form. One is at the source of these approvals to come in. We are saying that with the full support of the Central Government they have agreed in principle to cease issuing this IVS, individual visit scheme permits, so that will take away 50 per cent of the usual Mainland visitors coming to Hong Kong. Together with the 20-plus percentage points attributed to group tours from the Mainland, we will have removed a large chunk of the source of Mainland visitors coming to Hong Kong. The rest will be quite legitimate for business purposes. I'm sure you know there are a lot of businesses between Hong Kong and the Mainland and for visiting relatives or even in caring relatives and to visit them hospitals. These are very legitimate and humanitarian reasons for people to cross the border.

Another measure is really to reduce or to consolidate the number of border control points. In one go we are ceasing the service for passengers in six control points. That's quite a drastic measure. That again will hopefully reduce passenger flow and achieve the outcome of drastically limiting the people or the population mobility between the two places. I wouldn't agree that these are really minor, non-important issues for us to tackle the

current virus situation, and you must also bear in mind that from yesterday onwards, we have also imposed a very stringent, if not draconian, measure of disallowing people from Hubei Province to come in – either they are Hubei residents or they are people of all nationalities except Hong Kong residents, who have been in Hubei Province for the last 14 days, and I don't think many parts of the world have adopted that very stringent measure.

Reporter: I have three questions. The largest pro-establishment party, the DAB, expressed that it does not oppose to the closing of the border, and given Mainland visitors have accounted for about 20 to 30 per cent as of the latest situations, are you still categorically ruling out the closing of the border? And in case the situation worsens in the neighbouring provinces, for instance in Guangdong or Jiangsu, would you consider partially closing down or strengthening the restrictions on these cities, I mean when the situation comes to community outbreak? The second question is, you mentioned there is a sizeable number of Hubei residents already still in Hong Kong. Could you give us an idea of how many are there? Are there thousands, tens of thousands of them? Thirdly, a question for Secretary Mr Yau. You mentioned about the global procurement of masks. Because Professor Gabriel Leung mentioned about the outbreak of the virus could peak in about late April or early May, I mean how much pressure is that on the supplies of these masks as well as could you share about in what circumstances would the Government perhaps resell or balance these supplies in the private market if the situation is very intense? Thank you.

Chief Executive: Thank you. On the first question, I have said on the previous occasion that the only consideration of the Hong Kong SAR Government in dealing with this novel coronavirus infection is public health – public health underpinned by very strong scientific and expert advice. There is no other factor involved. So whether a particular political party has a certain wish or aspiration does not come into our consideration, and I hope all political parties in Hong Kong will support the SAR Government in taking that very scientific and public health-oriented approach and join hands with us in dealing with this public health crisis.

I have explained at length that the meaning of so-called complete closure of the border control points. It's very difficult to understand because there are such a large number of Hong Kong people travelling between these places, whether between Hong Kong and Mainland or Hong Kong and other places. To stop all passenger traffic on such a massive and comprehensive scale is not warranted. But what we have done is more or less what you have described. You said what about partial closing down. I'm now suspending the service at six border control points, so you can also describe that as partial closing down, although I would rather say that we are doing some sort of consolidation in order to reduce the population mobility and also to enable us to concentrate the manpower to do a much better and enhanced medical surveillance and inspection job at the border control points. But, as I said, the situation is evolving and changing very rapidly. If you asked me a week ago, I perhaps would not have that determination to put in place some of the measures that we have put in place yesterday and today. So we will continue to closely monitor the situation both locally and in the Mainland

and maybe even internationally and take the necessary and decisive actions to protect Hong Kong people's health.

As far as the number of Hubei residents who have entered Hong Kong prior to yesterday, when the ban took effect, unfortunately in our usual immigration system, we did not capture those statistics. But, if anything is to go by, we only allow them to come in for seven days and according to Immigration, yesterday we denied entry of about 300-plus, so if you make that assumption, and people who have left, either back to the Mainland or using Hong Kong as a transit to other places, then the number would not be in the range of the tens of thousands that you have mentioned – certainly not of that magnitude.

Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development: Regarding the supply of masks and other protective gears, we understand that in this sort of situation, they are heavily sought-after locally, across the boundary and globally. Our focus is to try to tackle the entire supply chain, that is production, supplies, logistics and also distribution. On the production side, we know that the major production might be across the boundary in the Mainland, so we have proposed to some of the producers, and actually some have come back to resume the production. But there were also certain circumstances that there might be (problems) in customs facilitations, which we have been standing ready to help. Through our customs-to-customs co-operation and discussions with the Mainland authorities, we succeeded in facilitating some consignments coming back to Hong Kong. But at the same time, we will continue to procure in the light of the demand locally. As far as the Government is concerned, our priority is to ensure adequate supply for medical professionals, including those in the Hospital Authority and the Department of Health. This will form the bulk of our demand and that's why we are saying that we will go for direct purchases, and we are sort of tendering out on the global basis to source more. In fact, our overseas offices (Hong Kong Economic and Trade Offices) are also helping by widening the net.

Of course, we also need to talk to local retail sectors on the distribution. Hopefully after this long holiday, more retail outlets will resume business and if they have stock, they can sell. But at the same time, if suppliers encounter the same problem that the Government encounters, we are also happy to help them. We are obtaining information on consignment bases to see if that will require the same customs facilitation. We will do the same as we did in the last weeks to help them, to facilitate. I'll be touching base with the wider retail sector to see how much more the Government can help and work together with them along this line. Thank you.

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