

Combating the Epidemic with Staunch National Support

Entering February 2022, COVID-19 continued to cause havoc with places worldwide, and Hong Kong could hardly remain unscathed. Hong Kong is facing unprecedented epidemic challenges triggered by the highly transmissible Omicron variant, with the spread of the virus hardly under restraint. Hong Kong has seen an exponential growth in local infections. The daily figure rose from about 100 cases reported on February 1 to several thousands per day at the end of the month where the daily figure even exceeded 10 000 cases on three consecutive days. In coping with the dire epidemic situation, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) has kept enhancing its response capacities and adjusting its anti-epidemic measures. However, the rapid spread of the virus has outgrown our existing capacity. The Central Authorities have then actively responded to our requests and provided us with ceaseless support in our fight against the epidemic. Various sectors of the community in Hong Kong have also responded to our call to join the fight against the epidemic. Together, we shall rise to the challenge with one heart and one mind, with stabilising the epidemic as early as possible as our overriding mission.

Development of epidemic situation

This fifth wave is rapid and fierce. More than 158 600 confirmed cases have been recorded so far since the end of the Lunar New Year holidays, some 12 times the sum of the number recorded in the previous two years. A total of 512 people have passed away (most of whom are elderly people with chronic illnesses), exceeding the total number of deaths recorded in the

past two years by some two times. The situation is worrying and heartbreaking.

HKSAR Government assuming primary responsibility and leveraging Central Authorities' strong support to curb epidemic

In pursuit of “dynamic zero infection”, Hong Kong has been strictly implementing the strategy of “preventing the importation of cases and the spread of the virus in the community” and striving to contain the virus by a multi-pronged approach so as to achieve “early identification, early isolation and early treatment” of the infected. Having regard to the development of the fifth wave of the epidemic, the HKSAR Government has been, with its own continuous efforts, adjusting and enhancing its anti-epidemic measures. However, the rapid deterioration of the epidemic has outgrown the capacities of the various parts of our anti-epidemic chain, and the Central Authorities' assistance is urgently needed.

At this critical juncture, Hong Kong should leverage the advantages of “One Country, Two Systems”. As the Chief Executive, I have submitted to the Central Authorities a report together with concrete requests for timely assistance from the Central Authorities. Our requests have promptly met with positive response. In this connection, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and President Xi Jinping has also made important instructions, stating that the HKSAR Government should assume the primary responsibility to stabilise the epidemic situation early as the overriding mission at present, and mobilise all available manpower and resources and adopt all necessary measures to safeguard the lives and health of Hong Kong people and the stability of society.

The Central Authorities assisted Hong Kong in our fight against the third and fourth waves of the epidemic in the second half of 2020. This time round, they have rolled out even stronger and swifter support initiatives, manifesting their deep

concern about Hong Kong’s epidemic situation and care about the well-being of Hong Kong people. Since the thematic meeting on the COVID-19 epidemic held between the HKSAR Government and the Central Authorities in Shenzhen on February 12, the Central Authorities have been providing us with ceaseless support. For example, they have sent epidemiological experts and experts in critical care medicine to Hong Kong to discuss and work out strategies with local health officials and experts; deployed mobile testing vehicles as well as over 100 testing technicians and nucleic acid testing personnel to Hong Kong in phases to enhance Hong Kong’s specimen collection and testing capabilities; commissioned a Mainland contractor with rich experience and strong mobilisation capability to assist in the construction of community isolation and treatment facilities in eight locations in Hong Kong; ensured medical supplies to Hong Kong, donated to us anti-epidemic proprietary Chinese medicines and ensured other supplies from the Mainland (by, inter alia, providing the Sea Express water transportation service from the Mainland to Hong Kong while planning to transport goods by rail).

Counting on the Central Authorities’ strong support for Hong Kong, I announced on February 22 the HKSAR Government’s overall anti-epidemic action plan with an overriding mission to stabilise the epidemic situation as early as possible. I stated clearly that the coming two to three months would be considerably critical and that we must adhere to and strengthen our various measures on five fronts. I also held a special meeting with the heads of Government departments the next day to give clear instructions to all the departments to work as a team and make all-out efforts to mobilise their staff to participate in various anti-epidemic operations. The relevant measures and latest development are summarised as below –

- (a) “Early identification” and “early isolation” to cut the virus transmission chains: In order to pin down infection cases more thoroughly in the community at large, the HKSAR

Government is planning at full steam the Community Universal Testing to be launched in March. After the announcement of the framework concerned, we have received some feedback about the scheme and are refining the details, with the aim of implementing the scheme in a thorough, speedy, orderly and effective manner. Before that, to expedite the testing process so as to confirm positive cases and offer assistance as early as practicable, the HKSAR Government will distribute more and make wider use of rapid antigen test kits (RATs), conduct more restriction-testing declaration operations based on sewage surveillance results at higher-risk buildings, dispense the review procedure by the Public Health Laboratory Services Branch under the Department of Health on the samples that test preliminarily positive by testing contractors. We are also planning to allow those with positive results in RATs to register through an online system such that they can be followed up as positive cases directly without seeking confirmation in nucleic acid tests.

On “early isolation”, it remains our policy objective to subject all confirmed people to isolation at places other than their places of accommodation so as not to infect others. That said, as a large number of confirmed patients are still at home pending admission to community isolation facilities or hospitals, the Department of Health and the Hospital Authority (HA) are rendering specific assistance to them, including operating a hotline for enquiries on medical issues, having activated some designated clinics to help provide diagnosis and treatment, and offering transport service by designated taxis to and from the clinics. At the same time, the HKSAR Government is making all-out efforts to set up more community isolation facilities to take in persons who have tested positive but with mild or no symptoms. In addition to the existing isolation facilities at Penny’s Bay and Lei Yue Mun Park and Holiday Village, extra community isolation and treatment facilities which

will come into operation in phases include those from three converted unoccupied buildings in the public housing estates and two sizeable transitional housing projects, rented commercial hotels as well as those constructed at eight sites and in the Lok Ma Chau Loop area. It is estimated that a total of over 70 000 units or beds will be provided.

- (b) Adopting a triage measure in patient treatment to reduce severe cases and deaths: Currently, all public hospitals, including North Lantau Hospital Hong Kong Infection Control Centre, provide more than 3 000 isolation beds in total, and the Community Treatment Facility located in AsiaWorld-Expo provides about 1 000 beds. When compared with other strains, infection with Omicron shows milder symptoms. At present, over 100 confirmed cases of patients in serious or critical conditions are being treated in hospitals. To enhance our treatment capability, both the Chief Executive of the HA and the Director of Fire Services have recently appealed to the public that COVID-19 patients with no or mild symptoms should not call for ambulance service to the Accident and Emergency (A&E) Departments of public hospitals, which might lead to a serious delay of service supposed to be used for emergency rescue. Besides, the A&E Departments are overloaded with patients, hindering healthcare staff from providing treatment for critical COVID-19 patients and others in serious conditions. General patients confirmed positive should remain home for self-isolation or pending admission to community isolation facilities. They can also make medical appointment at designated clinics under the HA if needed. Given that the overloading situation of the A&E Departments cannot be alleviated within a short period of time, the HKSAR Government, in collaboration with social welfare organisations, is setting up treatment and holding centres to specifically receive elderly patients referred by the HA. The first one is located at Choi Wing Road Sports Centre in Kwun Tong. Kai Tak Cruise Terminal, which is

under conversion, will also be used as elderly holding facilities estimated to provide around 1 200 beds. The Central Authorities have agreed to assign a Mainland construction team to build a hospital for emergency use in the Lok Ma Chau Loop area.

- (c) Measures to strictly prevent the importation of cases at border control points: The HKSAR Government has earlier on implemented the place-specific flight suspension mechanism for Australia, Canada, France, India, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Noting that the local epidemic situation remains severe, in order to prevent imported cases from posing additional pressure on the healthcare system at this crucial juncture of curbing the local epidemic situation, the HKSAR Government has extended the place-specific flight suspension mechanism until April 20.
- (d) Further tightening social distancing measures to significantly reduce the flow of people and prevent the spread of the virus: The Vaccine Pass arrangement has been fully implemented from February 24 onwards, which is applicable not only to all catering business premises and scheduled premises (such as department stores, supermarkets and markets) specified under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F), but also to schools, universities, government and public sector offices, indoor venues managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, public hospitals, residential care homes for the elderly and those for persons with disabilities, etc. through administrative means. Relevant persons entering or staying at the aforesaid premises must comply with the COVID-19 vaccination requirement.

To step up efforts to reduce the flow of people and contain the transmission risk in the community, the HKSAR

Government has further tightened social distancing measures by extending most of the existing measures from February 24 until April 20 (such as closing several categories of scheduled premises including the newly-added religious premises and barber shops/hair salons, allowing no more than two persons per group gathering in a public place, prohibiting multi-household gatherings at a private premise involving more than two households) as well as further reducing the maximum number of persons per table in catering premises to two. Furthermore, all persons shall wear a mask in any public places (including country parks), whether or not they are engaging physical activities; and taking masks off for eating and drinking will not be allowed on public transport carriers and in MTR paid areas.

- (e) Increasing the vaccination rate, especially among the elderly and children: To further build up protection level in the community against the variants, the HKSAR Government has set vaccination targets for various groups. From what it shows now, the first target of getting 90% of the eligible population (excluding those aged below 12) to receive the first dose of vaccine can be achieved by early March. We are striving to push the second-dose vaccination rate among the eligible population to 80% by mid-March, and to boost the vaccination rate of children to 90% by mid-April and that of the residential care homes for the elderly and those for persons with disabilities to 90% no later than mid-April. The HKSAR Government will work towards these goals by adopting targeted measures to speed up vaccination, including providing additional community vaccination stations, mobilising private clinics to boost the vaccination capacity, helping schools and district organisations conduct outreach vaccination, stepping up the deployment of resources by healthcare organisations for the provision of outreach vaccination to residential care homes through the Assess and Vaccinate Programme, etc.

The other major anti-epidemic and related measures are tabulated in the chronology table below –

Date	Event
February 4	The HKSAR Government expanded the special work arrangements for government employees and required those arranged to work from home to stand ready at all times to participate in anti-epidemic operations
February 4	The Chief Executive announced enhancements to anti-epidemic capabilities
February 8	The Chief Executive announced the latest anti-epidemic measures, including expanding the scope of scheduled premises being regulated to cover religious premises, shopping malls, department stores, department stores, supermarkets, markets and barber shops/hair salons; tightening the maximum number of people per group gathering in a public place to two; prohibiting more than two households from gathering in private premises; increasing the fixed penalty for any person who fails to comply with a compulsory testing notice or compulsory testing direction from \$5,000 to \$10,000
February 8	The HKSAR Government launched the “StayHomeSafe” Scheme, arranging for close contacts and household contacts of close contacts who are deemed appropriate after assessment to undergo home quarantine for 14 days and four days respectively. The Department of Health subsequently announced on February 26 the revised arrangement on the completion of quarantine, allowing close contacts who have received at least two doses of

Date	Event
	COVID-19 vaccines and obtained negative test results during RATs on Day 6 and Day 7 of the home quarantine period to leave the community isolation facilities or home premises earlier on Day 7
February 15	The Chief Executive announced the latest anti-epidemic measures, including requesting the assistance from the Central Authorities to significantly increase the capacity of conducting nucleic acid tests, making bulk purchases of RAT kits, converting Blocks 1 and 7 of Queen’s Hill Estate and Heng King House of Lai King Estate into community isolation facilities, and identifying more hotels for conversion into community isolation facilities; to this end, the Chief Executive conducted a webinar with the representatives of the hotel industry on February 16
February 17	The first batch of Mainland experts specialising in epidemiological investigation and technicians, together with the first fleet of mobile testing vehicles, arrived in Hong Kong
February 18	The Chief Executive announced that in view of the recent severe epidemic situation, the sixth-term Chief Executive Election originally scheduled for March 27 would be postponed until May 8, while the new nomination period will run from April 3 to 16
February 18	The designated taxi fleet started providing free transport service to patients between the designated clinics of the Hospital Authority and the patients’ residences

Date	Event
February 18	Radio Television Hong Kong's TV 32 was turned into a channel dedicated to providing anti-epidemic information
February 19	The commencement ceremony of the construction of community isolation and treatment facilities at Penny's Bay was held. The Chief Executive attended it and delivered a speech
February 19	The second batch of Mainland experts specialising in COVID-19 medication arrived in Hong Kong
February 21	The designated bus fleet formed by non-franchised bus and public light bus trades started providing transport service to people who test positive for COVID-19 but with no or mild symptoms to community isolation facilities
February 22	The Chief Executive announced the overall anti-epidemic action plan and advanced the school holidays originally scheduled for July and August to March and April (the Education Bureau would announce the relevant details, including responding to the needs of international schools)
February 24	The Emergency (Exemption from Statutory Requirements) (COVID-19) Regulation was gazetted to provide the legal basis for the HKSAR Government to implement anti-epidemic measures supported by the Central Authorities, including the construction of hospitals and isolations facilities

Date	Event
February 24	The HKSAR Government signed a co-operation agreement in respect of eight locations for the construction of community isolation and treatment facilities with the designated contractor commissioned by the Central Authorities in response to the HKSAR Government's request
February 25	The Employment (Amendment) Bill 2022 was gazetted and will be introduced into the Legislative Council for scrutiny. The legislative amendments seek to stipulate that the absence from work of employees for compliance with anti-epidemic requirements with restriction on movement will be deemed as sickness day(s) under the Employment Ordinance and provide for sickness allowance payable to eligible employees; that the dismissal of an employee by reason of the employee being subject to such restriction on movement is considered unreasonable dismissal; and that the dismissal of an employee due to his/her no vaccination compliance (except with sufficient medical reasons) after request being made by the employer by the expiry of a specific period constitutes a valid reason for dismissal under the Employment Ordinance

Anti-epidemic Fund

Faced with the aggravating situation of the fifth wave of the epidemic, the HKSAR Government needed to extend the tightened social distancing measures. Following the launch of the fifth round of the Anti-epidemic Fund (AEF) in early January, the HKSAR Government announced the sixth round of the AEF

in late January to provide further support to the sectors affected. The sixth round of the AEF comprises 48 measures which fall within four categories: (i) relief for premises that are required to be closed or have their business significantly restricted by the tightening of social distancing measures; (ii) relief for businesses that are hard hit by the pandemic and indirectly affected by the tightening of social distancing measures; (iii) support for individuals working in the hard-hit business and frontline staff who have been making contributions to anti-epidemic efforts; and (iv) support for the short-term/temporarily unemployed. The Finance Committee of the Legislative Council approved expeditiously the funding application of \$27 billion for the sixth round of the AEF on February 15. The schemes are being rolled out one after another so as to benefit the relevant businesses and individuals as soon as possible.

Work in concert to overcome the epidemic

To safeguard the lives and health of Hong Kong people, we shall not lose this smokeless battle. The HKSAR Government has been making all-out efforts to fight the epidemic, and various sectors of the community have also been working in concert. With the utmost care of the Central Authorities as well as the staunch support from the ministries and commissions of the Central Authorities and the Guangdong Provincial Government, let us win this anti-epidemic fight as soon as possible with unwavering determination and strong faith, so that Hong Kong people could regain their joy and resume their normal lives.

Mrs Carrie Lam
Chief Executive
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
February 28, 2022