

Enhancing Capabilities on All Fronts to Stabilise the Fifth Wave of the Epidemic

The fifth wave of the COVID-19 epidemic is rapid and fierce. Hong Kong went through a turbulent epidemic phase posed by the highly transmissible Omicron variant strain in March 2022. While the number of cases tested positive for COVID-19 (from nucleic acid tests and rapid antigen tests (RAT)) has shown a gradual downtrend after reaching the peak on March 3, it is saddening that over 7 000 fatalities have been recorded. The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) has never let down its guard, leveraging the staunch support of the Central Government, to suppress this latest wave with unwavering determination in order to safeguard the lives and health of our citizens. While keeping in view the epidemic development, the Government has also taken note of the overall social and economic needs of Hong Kong and the well-being of businesses and individuals. Different sectors of society have been responding positively and have pulled their efforts together with combating the epidemic as the overriding mission.

Epidemic situation

From the outbreak of the fifth wave until March 30, a total of 1 138 138 cases were tested positive for COVID-19, of which 7 493 deaths were recorded. Judging from the figures, this wave should have peaked on March 3 with 76 991 positive cases in a single day and is trending downward gradually, with the daily case count dropping to a four-digit number from March 26 onwards and reaching 6 981 on March 30. Elderly people yet to be vaccinated have been most severely hit by this wave. Among the death cases, more than 90% were people aged 65 or above, and about 70% were aged 80 or above; close to 60% were the

elderly living in residential care homes; about 90% did not receive two vaccine doses.

Enhancing anti-epidemic capabilities

The HKSAR Government is grateful to the Central Government for sending us four batches of experts, amid the severe epidemic at present, to provide advice on various aspects of tackling the epidemic. With reference drawn from the experts' views, the Government has focused on reducing deaths, severe cases and infections as our current-stage anti-epidemic work, addressing infection risks in key groups of people, premises and organisations, and according priority to the elderly.

Furthermore, the HKSAR Government has been enhancing its anti-epidemic capabilities on various fronts over the past month, including:

- (a) the Hospital Authority (HA) has converted Queen Elizabeth Hospital in the Kowloon Central Cluster into a designated hospital for COVID-19 patients with around 1 300 beds. Other designated hospitals are Tin Shui Wai Hospital, North Lantau Hospital, Tung Wah Group of Hospitals Fung Yiu King Hospital, Ruttonjee Hospital, Haven of Hope Hospital and Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital, significantly raising the number of beds for COVID-19 patients to around 11 500;
- (b) the capability of the community treatment facility at AsiaWorld-Expo (AWE) has been increased with the support of close to 400 members of the Mainland medical support team to increase the scale of service and quality of care, including the integration of Chinese and Western medicines in treatment;
- (c) the Social Welfare Department (SWD) now operates seven holding centres, including the community isolation centre at

AWE converted from a quarantine centre last month, to provide close to 3 000 beds for residents of residential care homes with mild or no symptoms and elderly patients assessed by HA to be in the course of recovery and suitable for admission;

- (d) private hospitals have rendered assistance by admitting patients upon HA's referral, strengthening healthcare service for elderly patients, and providing medical support for community isolation facilities and telemedicine service for COVID-19 patients, etc.;
- (e) with the support of the Government, HA has successfully procured sufficient quantities of two COVID-19 oral drugs, namely Molnupiravir from Merck Sharp & Dohme and Paxlovid from Pfizer. Over 20 000 patients have been prescribed with the drugs thus far;
- (f) the community isolation facility at Tsing Yi, the first of such facilities constructed with the Central Government's support, was handed over to the HKSAR Government on March 1. It, together with the other five community isolation facilities that came into operation one after another the same month, can provide around 20 000 beds. Three more facilities at Penny's Bay, Kai Tak and The Loop are under construction and will provide an additional 30 000 beds;
- (g) the HKSAR Government's distribution of anti-epidemic bags containing RAT kits, proprietary Chinese medicines, thermometers, Paracetamol, pulse oximeters, health booklets, etc., to COVID-19 patients under isolation and their close contacts under quarantine at home (collectively relevant persons at home) is largely in order. Over one million kits have already been distributed;

- (h) to strengthen assistance for the relevant persons at home, the support hotline of the Home Affairs Department (HAD) has been ramped up to 280 lines and the medical hotline of HA to about 180 lines;
- (i) since mid-March, HAD has taken over from SWD the home delivery service to the relevant persons at home who cannot make their own arrangements for daily necessities and food;
- (j) the number of designated clinics set up by HA for providing diagnosis service to COVID-19 patients has increased from 14 in late February to 23. The Transport and Housing Bureau, together with the taxi industry, has set up a designated taxi fleet of about 500 participating taxis currently to provide patients with free transport services between designated clinics and their residences;
- (k) with the assistance from the Central Government, co-operation with testing contractors, and support by sample-taking personnel, technicians and mobile nucleic acid testing vehicles from the Mainland, the daily maximum capacity of testing can be up to 200 000 or 300 000 tests;
- (l) schools of Chinese medicine at local universities have actively participated in the anti-epidemic work by providing Chinese medicine-based prevention prescriptions and telemedicine service to members of the public; and the HKSAR Government has also subsidised Chinese medicine practitioners through the Chinese Medicine Development Fund to provide free telemedicine service and delivery service of Chinese medicines to those who test positive with COVID-19 and staying at home. Also, HA continues to provide Chinese medicine rehabilitation service for discharged patients or people who have completed isolation in the Chinese Medicine Clinics cum Training and Research Centres through the “Special Chinese medicine Out-patient

Programme for COVID-19 Patients”, with 10 courses for each person; and

- (m) the HKSAR Government will start distributing anti-epidemic service bags, containing masks, RAT kits, proprietary Chinese medicines, medical information, etc., to all households in Hong Kong on April 2 to support citizens to fight the epidemic.

Mid-term review

Since March 9, I have been holding daily press conferences (except Tuesdays when Executive Council meetings are convened) with key members of the anti-epidemic team including relevant officials of the HKSAR Government, the Chief Executive of HA, etc. to give an account of the latest developments of the anti-epidemic work to members of the public to enhance their understanding thereof. On March 21, I gave an account of a mid-term review of the range of measures announced on February 22 that aimed to contain the fifth wave of the epidemic. After comprehensively considering the epidemic development, our enhanced anti-epidemic capabilities mentioned above, and the social and economic development needs, I announced that most of the existing measures be maintained until mid- or late April as originally planned. Meanwhile, we would focus on treatment, reducing serious and death cases, to relieve the pressure on hospitals and help the residential care homes for the elderly regain strength. We would also further strengthen our nucleic testing capability, and promote the use of the RAT kits and require citizens obtaining a positive test result to so report via the online declaration system in a timely manner so that they can be identified more quickly for appropriate isolation or treatment. In the mid-term review, the HKSAR Government has also set the direction on four aspects as follows:

- (a) to lift the place-specific flight suspension mechanism for nine countries (i.e. Australia, Canada, France, India, Nepal,

Pakistan, the Philippines, the United Kingdom and the United States) with effect from April 1 and, on the premise of preventing importation of cases, rationalise the boarding, quarantine and testing arrangements for Hong Kong residents from overseas places. Details of the arrangements were set out in the press releases issued on March 26 by the relevant policy bureau;

- (b) to allow local schools to resume classes as soon as April 19 after the Easter holidays as planned and continue to aim at commencing the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination on April 22;
- (c) to relax the various social distancing measures in three phases and in three months from April 21 onwards on the condition that the epidemic shows no signs of rebound and continues the downward trend; and
- (d) to strive to raise the vaccination rates of four groups of people to 90% (i.e. the second-dose rate for people aged 12 or above, the first-dose rate for children aged 3 to 11, the first-dose rate for the elderly in residential care homes, and the first-dose rate for the elderly aged 70 or above) by the end of April, with a multi-pronged approach adopted to boost the vaccination rates of the elderly and children;

The major anti-epidemic and related measures introduced are tabulated below in the chronological order:

| Date | Event |
|-------------|--|
| March 1 | The first community isolation facility constructed with the Central Government's support at Tsing Yi was handed over to us |
| March 1 | The holding centre at Shek Kip Mei Park Sports Centre set up by SWD came into operation |

| Date | Event |
|-------------|--|
| March 2 | The railway transportation of goods from the Mainland to Hong Kong commenced, with the first train carrying about 50 tonnes of anti-epidemic supplies arriving at Hong Kong |
| March 4 | The HKSAR Government announced that for persons aged 60 or above who have received two doses of the Sinovac or BioNTech vaccine, the time interval for receiving the third dose be shortened from six months after the second dose to three months; and that for children and teenagers aged five to 17, the time interval between the first two doses of the BioNTech vaccine be shortened from 12 weeks to eight weeks |
| March 6 | The Fire Services Department started facilitation, via email, WhatsApp hotline and WeChat accounts, regarding the admission of people having tested positive to community isolation facilities as soon as possible |
| March 7 | HA activated three more designated clinics for COVID-19 patients and activated six more on March 15, bringing the total number to 23 |
| March 9 | The second community isolation facility constructed with the Central Government's support at San Tin, Yuen Long was handed over to us |
| March 9 | HA converted Queen Elizabeth Hospital in the Kowloon Central Cluster into a designated hospital for COVID-19 patients; Tin Shui Wai Hospital, North Lantau Hospital, Tung Wah Group of Hospitals Fung Yiu King Hospital, Ruttonjee Hospital, Haven of Hope Hospital and |

| Date | Event |
|-------------|--|
| | Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital were also converted into designated hospitals beforehand or afterwards |
| March 12 | The third community isolation facility constructed with the Central Government's support at the Hong Kong Boundary Crossing Facilities Island of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge was handed over to us |
| March 12 | HAD launched the Home Support Supplies Delivery Service for persons in need, including those pending admission to hospitals or community isolation facilities who needed to stay at home but could not make their own arrangements for daily necessities and food |
| March 13 | The fourth community isolation facility constructed with the Central Government's support at Ma Sik Road, Fanling was handed over to us |
| March 14 | Following the introduction and prescription of the COVID-19 oral drug Molnupiravir by HA earlier on, the first shipment of another COVID-19 oral drug Paxlovid arrived in Hong Kong for use by HA |
| March 16 | Following the arrival in Hong Kong by dozens of members of the Mainland medical support team in batches early this month, another batch of around 300 members arrived in Hong Kong to collaborate with the HA team at the community treatment facility at AWE to provide treatment for COVID-19 patients |
| March 16 | The holding centre at Harbour Road Sports |

| Date | Event |
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| | Centre set up by SWD came into operation |
| March 17 | The fifth community isolation facility constructed with the Central Government' support at Hung Shui Kiu, Yuen Long was handed over to us |
| March 20 | The HKSAR Government announced adjustments to the vaccination requirements of the Vaccine Pass to further encourage members of the public to get vaccinated as soon as possible, including advancing the implementation of stage-three Vaccine Pass from end June to end May and shortening the grace period for receiving the third dose after the second dose under the Vaccine Pass |
| March 21 | The Chief Executive announced a mid-term review of the measures aimed to stabilise the fifth wave of the epidemic and a current-stage anti-epidemic road map |
| March 21 | Outbound travellers using land boundary control points (i.e. Shenzhen Bay Port or the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge Hong Kong Port) were required since then to undergo an additional rapid nucleic acid test and only those who received a negative result could continue with their journeys |
| March 21 | The Kai Tak Holding Centre at Kai Tak Cruise Terminal set up by SWD came into operation in phases |
| March 22 | Considering the latest development of the epidemic situation, the HKSAR Government announced the resumption of issuing compulsory testing notices |
| March 23 | The holding centre at Tin Shui Wai Sports Centre |

| Date | Event |
|-------------|--|
| | set up by SWD came into operation |
| March 24 | The sixth community isolation facility constructed with the Central Government's support at Tam Mei, Yuen Long was handed over to us |
| March 25 | The HKSAR Government announced that government departments would resume public services gradually from April 1 onwards with a view to largely resuming normal public services from April 21 onwards |
| March 26 | The HKSAR Government announced that the boarding, quarantine and testing arrangements for inbound travellers be adjusted under the risk-based principle, including lifting the place-specific flight suspension mechanism with effect from April 1 and rationalising the relevant arrangements, and increasing the supply of designated quarantine hotels to meet the demand of Hong Kong residents (including foreign domestic helpers) returning from overseas |
| March 29 | Persons travelling to the Mainland and Macao via the Hong Kong International Airport were required to hold a negative result of the additional rapid nucleic acid test when checking in for the flights |
| March 29 | The Mainland Chinese medicine expert delegation arrived in Hong Kong to support the HKSAR's anti-epidemic work |
| March 30 | Packaging of anti-epidemic service bags for distribution to all households in Hong Kong commenced |

Ensuring stable supplies from the Mainland

The HKSAR Government has been working closely with the Guangdong Provincial Government and the Shenzhen Municipal Government to proactively improve the arrangements of land transport (including the centralised transfer yards for cross-boundary goods vehicles set up at a number of boundary control points), water transport (including a number of water transportation routes connecting Hong Kong with Shenzhen and other cities in Guangdong) and railway transport (including the increase in daily trains to transport anti-epidemic supplies having regard to demand) so as to ensure stable supplies of fresh food, daily food and living supplies, etc. to Hong Kong. The HKSAR Government is grateful for the cross-border transport sector's compliance with the various anti-epidemic measures to safeguard supplies to Hong Kong.

Three pillars of support for affected industries and individuals

Upon the challenges posed by the COVID-19 epidemic over the past two-odd years, different sectors have been impacted to varying extents. Besides striving to prevent and control the disease, the HKSAR Government attaches great importance to the situation of enterprises and the well-being of members of the public. It has been supporting enterprises and safeguarding employment through three pillars, namely the Anti-epidemic Fund (AEF), the Government's Budgets and the Employment Support Scheme (ESS). In response to the fifth wave of the epidemic:

- (a) the HKSAR Government has rolled out the fifth and sixth rounds of the AEF, with funding commitments totalling about \$30.6 billion, to provide support for the enterprises and individuals directly affected or hard hit by the epidemic and the social distancing measures. Among the measures, the Temporary Unemployment Relief Scheme, launched for the first time, has been open to applications since March 23

to provide a one-off subsidy of \$10,000 to people who have lost their jobs due to the fifth wave of the epidemic. A total of over 260 000 applications have been received thus far;

- (b) the Financial Secretary, through the 2022-23 Budget delivered on February 23, announced a series of measures to support members of the public and enterprises with commitments amounting to over \$170 billion, including the disbursement to each eligible person another round of electronic consumption vouchers with a total value of \$10,000; and
- (c) following the ESS in 2020, I announced on March 18 to roll out the 2022 ESS to provide eligible employers with three-month wage subsidies (May to July 2022). The HKSAR Government is refining the details of the 2022 ESS, with the total amount of subsidies estimated to be \$26 billion to \$31 billion. It aims to seek funding from the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council in April for injection into the AEF.

Overcoming the epidemic with confidence

In the first three months of 2022, Hong Kong went through unprecedented challenges that had brought about anxiety to citizens and sorrow to those who have lost their loved ones. The HKSAR Government will spare no effort in fighting the epidemic and work in unity to continue to review the epidemic situation with local and Mainland experts and tap views from society at large. The mission is to achieve the greatest anti-epidemic effect at the smallest cost and reducing as far as possible the impact of the epidemic on the economic and social development, while upholding the principles of safeguarding lives as a priority and basing discussions on science. With the Central Government as the strongest support of the HKSAR, as long as all sectors of the community and members of the public remain confident and fully support the HKSAR Government's anti-

epidemic measures, I am sure we will be able to weather the storm and win the anti-epidemic battle, returning to normal life early and resuming the people flow with the Mainland and overseas places in an orderly manner.

Mrs Carrie Lam
Chief Executive
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
March 30, 2022