

Continue Our Fight Determined to Win

On 25 January, which was also the first day of the Chinese New Year, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government raised the COVID-19 response level to “Emergency”, the highest level, and since then I have been chairing the inter-departmental Steering Committee cum Command Centre. It has been a long month, and it is time to take stock.

Hong Kong has a robust system for fighting epidemics and has gone through the tragic SARS outbreak. In the face of a novel virus about which little is known, we dare not underestimate its severity. Our preventive work against the disease started immediately once the Department of Health first received notification of the situation in Wuhan from the National Health Commission. Multiple measures were taken concurrently, including strengthening health screening at boundary control points, requiring hospitals and doctors to report suspected cases, setting up a surveillance system and reminding the public to observe personal hygiene. As I said in public back on 7 January, the HKSAR Government’s fight against the virus must adhere to three important principles, that is, speedy response in light of the situation, moving ahead of the times to prepare for the worse and operating in an open and transparent manner. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of our colleagues of all ranks, all three requirements have been met.

Speedy response in light of the situation

Assisted by a number of experts, the Government has taken actions based on the continuous assessment of the situation with a view to cutting off the transmission of the virus in Hong Kong. In the process, we raced against time to stay ahead of the virus. More often than not, decisions had to be made within hours. Our major response actions are set out in the following chronology of key events:

| Date | Event |
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| 8 January | Including COVID-19 in the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance to provide a legal basis for future measures. |

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| 13 January | Launching the Enhanced Laboratory Surveillance Programme to identify suspected cases proactively. |
| 23 January | Activating the first quarantine centre, after the first two confirmed cases of infection appeared in Hong Kong. |
| 24 January | Suspending flights and High Speed Rail services between Hong Kong and Wuhan. |
| 25 January | Raising the response level under the Preparedness and Response Plan to “Emergency”; Chief Executive appointing four experts to form an expert advisory panel, and announcing the deferral of class resumption after the Chinese New Year holidays until 17 February for all schools in Hong Kong. |
| 27 January | Imposing entry restrictions on Hubei residents and non-Hong Kong residents having visited Hubei Province in the past 14 days. |
| 30 January | Suspending passenger services at six land and sea boundary control points. |
| 31 January | Announcing the deferral of class resumption until 2 March for all schools in Hong Kong. |
| 4 February | Suspending passenger services at another four land and sea boundary control points, leaving only two land boundary control points in service, i.e. Shenzhen Bay Port and Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge Hong Kong Port. |
| 5 February | Suspending passenger services at Kai Tak Cruise Terminal and Ocean Terminal, leaving only Hong Kong International Airport and the above two land boundary control points in service. |

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| 7 February | The Executive Council confirming a state of public health emergency in Hong Kong and enacting a regulation to require all entrants from the Mainland (except those exempted) to undergo home quarantine. |
| 8 February | Implementing compulsory quarantine. As at 24 February, a daily average of 1 204 persons were subject to compulsory quarantine for 14 days. |
| 9 February | Completing virus tests on all crew members (about 1 800) on the World Dream cruise ship, allowing 1 800 passengers to disembark. |
| 10 February | Evacuating residents concerned in Hong Mei House, Cheung Hong Estate to quarantine centres, who were subsequently arranged to return home on 15 February upon comprehensive inspection of their flats and completion of virus tests on them. |
| 13 February | Announcing that classes would not resume before 16 March for all schools in Hong Kong. |
| 14 February | Announcing the application for no less than \$25 billion to set up an Anti-epidemic Fund. A sum of \$30 billion was approved by the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council on 21 February for that purpose. |
| 15 February | Announcing the arrangement of free chartered flights to bring back the Hong Kong residents on board the Diamond Princess cruise ship who were allowed to disembark after passing virus tests. |
| 19 February | Expanding the Enhanced Laboratory Surveillance Programme to conduct virus tests on certain patients attending general out-patient clinics as well as accident and emergency departments. |

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| 23 February | Completing the operation to bring back the Hong Kong residents on board the Diamond Princess cruise ship by chartered flights in three batches. |
| 24 February | Announcing the arrangement of chartered flights to bring back in batches Hong Kong people stranded in Hubei. |
| 25 February | <p>Imposing entry restrictions on non-Hong Kong residents coming from Korea or having visited Korea in the past 14 days. All Hong Kong residents coming back from Korea will be put on medical surveillance for 14 days, while those Hong Kong residents having visited Daegu or Gyeongsangbuk-do will be sent to quarantine centres for compulsory quarantine for 14 days.</p> <p>Announcing that classes will not resume before the end of the Easter holidays (about 20 April) for all schools in Hong Kong, and the Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (DSE) will start on 27 March.</p> |

Moving ahead of the times to prepare for the worse

Over the past month, the HKSAR Government accorded top priority to the prevention and control of the disease. The Steering Committee cum Command Centre has held eight meetings attended by all Principal Officials and department heads concerned, while the Chief Executive has convened five expert advisory panel meetings. On top of these, there have been hundreds of working meetings and site visits in preparation for various actions. All available manpower and resources have been deployed to fight the disease. As the situation may escalate and the number of people required to undergo quarantine may go up, the departments concerned, together with contractors and suppliers, have wasted no time in constructing isolation and quarantine facilities, arranging transport and delivering supplies, trying to make the best preparation for the worst-case scenario and contribute a part to the fight. I have gone to the front line to meet the healthcare staff, colleagues and volunteers there on several occasions. I was deeply touched by their zeal and dedication.

Operating in an open and transparent manner

To be effective in tackling the disease, we must alleviate the public's anxiety through timely dissemination of easy-to-understand information. In the face of fake news, rumours and unfounded allegations spreading online, we must make clarifications as quickly as possible to stem panic. Channels for communication with the public in fighting the disease include the following:

- Daily press briefings by the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) and the Hospital Authority (HA) at 4:30 pm to update the number of confirmed cases and the development of the infection situation;
- 47 media stand-ups by the Chief Executive and Principal Officials to make responses on policy matters;
- A dedicated website set up by the CHP for consolidating and disseminating information;
- An Interactive Map Dashboard on COVID-19 infection situation in Hong Kong, which enables the public to keep abreast of the current situation and the relevant figures;
- A dedicated government webpage (coronavirus.gov.hk) that provides integrated, one-stop information;
- Publicity campaigns to disseminate personal hygiene messages through online and offline media in a number of ethnic minority languages apart from English and Chinese; and
- Tamar Talk Facebook page, which provides information and clarifies rumours using simple and easy-to-understand text and data.

Latest developments

As at midnight on 25 February, there were 81 confirmed cases in Hong Kong, including five cases involving Hong Kong residents back from the Diamond Princess cruise ship. Despite the close geographical proximity and heavy flow of people between Hong Kong and the Mainland, as well as the high urban density here, the number of confirmed cases in Hong Kong is lower than those in Japan, South Korea

and Singapore. This testifies to our hard efforts in containing the virus. Apart from a few cases in which groups of people got infected in social gatherings, there is no extensive community-level infection in Hong Kong.

To respond effectively to this epidemic, which may be around for quite some time, the HKSAR Government will spare no effort in implementing the following ten measures:

- (1) Continuing to adopt the “containment” strategy based on experts’ advice with a view to cutting off the transmission of the virus by enhancing public education and calling on the public to take all precautionary measures and reduce social contacts;
- (2) Increasing isolation and quarantine facilities and actively participating in clinical trials of new drugs to cope with a potential rise in the demand for treatment;
- (3) Enhancing the capacity of the Public Health Laboratory Centre of the Department of Health to support the HA’s Enhanced Laboratory Surveillance Programme for the early identification of potential cases of infection (In fact, 32 of the 81 confirmed cases have been identified proactively by the HA through the Programme);
- (4) Addressing the shortage of surgical masks and other personal protective equipment, giving priority to the needs of healthcare workers and other frontline personnel involved in combating the epidemic;
- (5) Enhancing the entire community’s capacity in fighting the disease through projects under the Anti-epidemic Fund, in particular facilitating the local production of surgical masks and technology application;
- (6) Taking care of the two groups of Hong Kong residents stranded in Japan and Hubei Province respectively, and arranging for those in Hubei to return to Hong Kong in batches at the earliest opportunity;
- (7) Subject to sufficient precautionary measures being taken and social isolation maintained as appropriate, adjusting the special work arrangement for civil servants so as to gradually resume normal public services;

- (8) Assisting the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority in conducting the Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (DSE) this year in a safe and orderly manner, with sufficient preventive equipment provided for all examination venues and candidates;
- (9) Showing our care and concern for those affected by the epidemic through such measures as setting up telephone hotlines; providing support for residents under home quarantine; distributing donated surgical masks to the elderly and the underprivileged; arranging for medication to be delivered to elderly recipients of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) under the Portable CSSA Scheme who are unable to return to Hong Kong from Guangdong and Fujian Provinces for medical consultation because of cross-boundary travel restrictions; and implement projects under the Anti-epidemic Fund as soon as practicable to support the sectors and employees hit hard by the disease; and
- (10) Keeping a close watch on the development of the epidemic in countries and regions across the world, and taking decisive measures as necessary on the basis of scientific findings and expert advice.

Fighting the epidemic together

My heartfelt gratitude goes to all those involved in combating the epidemic. I would like to thank the healthcare professionals for their professionalism and whole-hearted dedication to patients; the civil servants for their unswerving commitment to duties; the volunteers for their selfless devotion; and Prof. Gabriel Leung, Prof. Keiji Fukuda, Prof. Yuen Kwok-yung and Prof. David Hui Shu-cheong on the expert advisory panel for their staunch support. I also appreciate very much the efforts of various sectors in supporting the Government's anti-epidemic initiatives, including the Legislative Council, which has speedily approved the funding application for the \$30 billion Anti-epidemic Fund, and the landlords who have offered rental concessions to their commercial tenants. This is a protracted battle that we need to keep fighting together.

Every time after a meeting of the expert advisory panel, Prof. Yuen Kwok-yung would say to me, “So long as we love Hong Kong, we are sure to win this battle against the disease!” I believe that with our love, Hong Kong will not only tide over this difficult time, but will come out stronger.

Mrs Carrie Lam
Chief Executive
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
25 February 2020