

Two Months into Our Fight Continue to Stay Vigilant

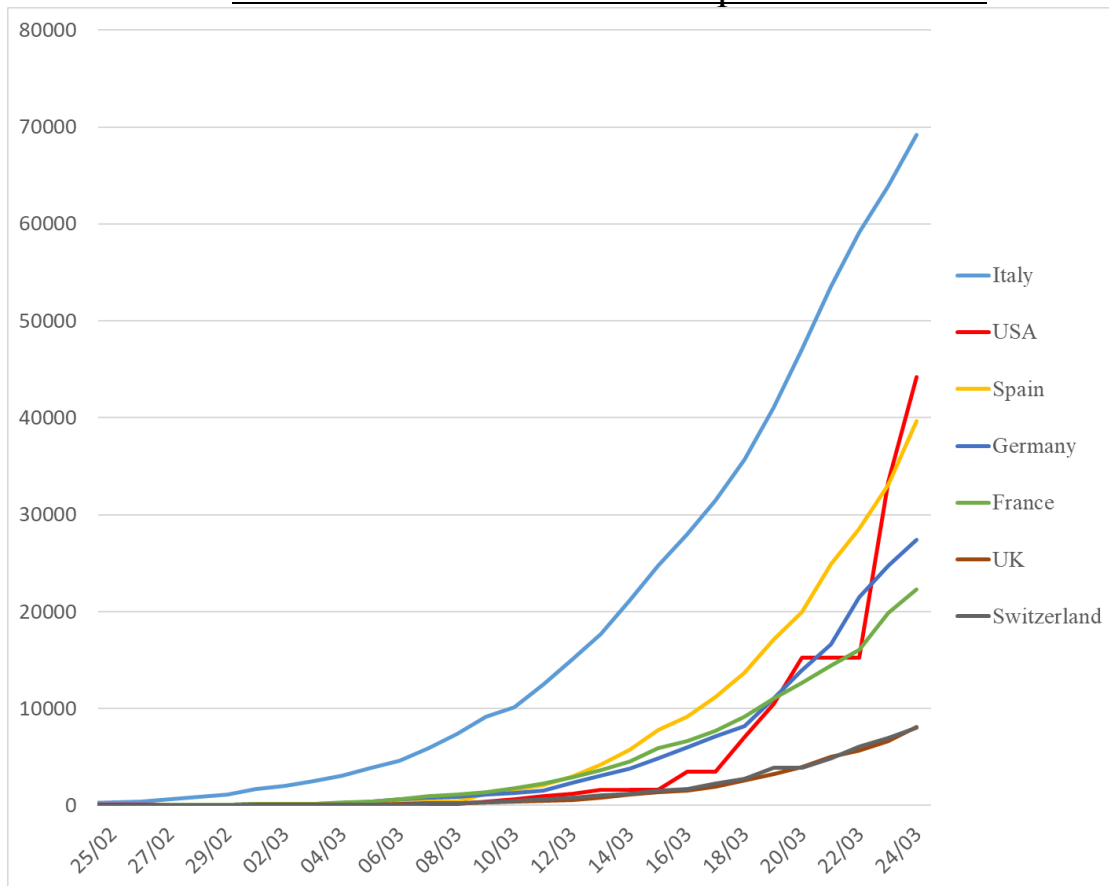
It has been two months since the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government raised the COVID-19 response level to the highest level of “Emergency” on 25 January. A month ago, I wrote an article titled “*Continue Our Fight Determined to Win*” to report on our anti-epidemic work in the first month. Today, I would like to review with you the developments of the epidemic and the Government’s responses over the past month, as well as make some urgent appeals.

Developments of the epidemic

In the period from mid-February to mid-March, the overall situation of the epidemic in Hong Kong was stable. There were almost no imported cases from the Mainland, and there were only single-digit new confirmed cases each day. If we exclude imported cases/cases with a travel history of Hong Kong residents and their close contacts, there were only sporadic local cases, and even zero local cases in 12 days. This shows that the whole community has a high awareness of disease prevention and has been vigilant in maintaining personal hygiene and social distancing, and the Government’s anti-epidemic measures have attained certain results.

However, as the disease is rapidly spreading overseas, the number of confirmed cases and the speed at which it increases are terrifying. The global number of confirmed cases reached 100 000 on 6 March, exceeded 200 000 on 18 March, and subsequently increased to 300 000 in just three days and to 400 000 today in another three days. Following the outbreak in Korea earlier, outbreaks occurred within a short time in places like Europe and the United States, with Italy and Spain becoming the most heavily hit regions.

Cumulative number of confirmed cases
in selected countries in Europe and America



(Figures from 25 February to 24 March)

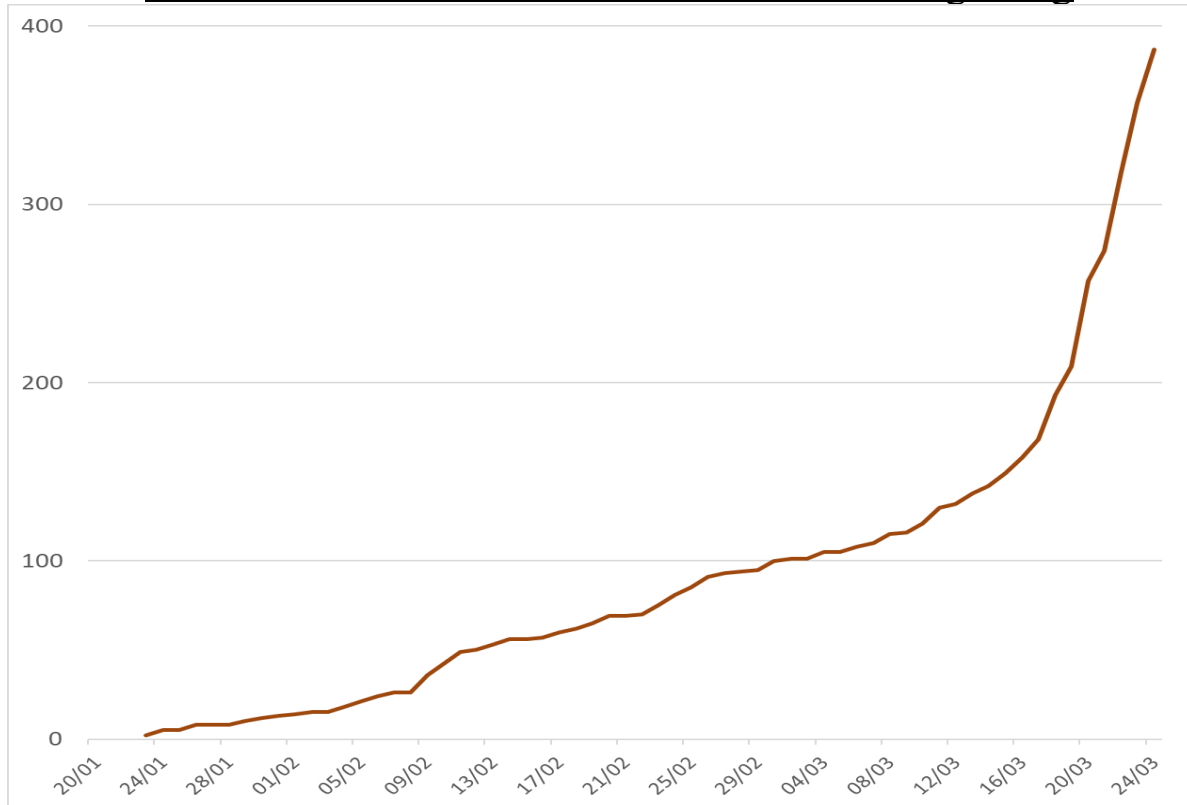
Since there is a huge difference in the population of every country and region, considering the number of confirmed cases alone may not reflect the severity of the epidemic in different places. The incidence rate of infection per million population is therefore a common indicator:

Countries and regions	Cumulative no. of confirmed cases	Population (million)	Incidence rate (cases per million population)
Mainland China	81218	1435.0	56.6
Italy	69176	60.5	1144.1
United States of America	44183	331.0	133.5
Spain	39673	46.8	848.5
Germany	27436	83.8	327.5
France	22300	65.3	341.6
Korea	9137	51.3	178.2
United Kingdom	8077	67.9	119.0
Switzerland	8015	8.7	926.1
Australia	1709	25.5	67.0
Japan	1193	126.5	9.4
Singapore	558	5.9	95.4
Hong Kong	387	7.5	51.6
Taiwan	216	23.8	9.1
Macao	30	0.65	46.2

(Figures as at 24 March)

From the chart and table above, we can actually see that Hong Kong's situation is better than quite a number of regions in Europe, America and Asia Pacific. During discussions and in literature regarding this disease, I always hear experts say that the Government should strive to flatten the curve. From the chart below, we can see that the curve for Hong Kong, before rising almost linearly in the recent ten days due to the large increase in imported cases, was quite flat. Yet, this relatively stable situation has changed since mid March, which is worrying.

Cumulative number of confirmed cases in Hong Kong



(Figures from 23 January (date of first confirmed cases) to 24 March)

Due to the escalating epidemic and the gradual suspension of local universities and boarding schools in Europe and the United States, a large number of Hong Kong residents and students studying abroad returned to Hong Kong. This wave of return to Hong Kong led to a great increase in imported cases. In the past 14 days, close to 90% of confirmed cases (233 cases in total) either have been abroad or are close contacts of these confirmed cases. Just Hong Kong residents studying in the United Kingdom account for 28 confirmed cases.

The Expert Advisory Panel of the Government's Steering Committee cum Command Centre pointed out that although the drastic increase in number of cases is worrying, Hong Kong can still contain the epidemic as long as we step up the containment strategy adopted previously and have the support of the general public.

Anti-epidemic efforts

The inter-departmental Steering Committee cum Command Centre chaired by me has remained vigilant over the past month. During the time when the infection situation was rather stable, we still kept a close watch on the developments of the epidemic in the local community and in other places of the world. We also made use of the opportunity to make necessary preparations for future anti-epidemic work. These include enhancing community surveillance through free virus tests, providing more isolation and quarantine centres, increasing the production and procurement of surgical masks and other personal protective equipment, and implementing over 20 initiatives under the Anti-epidemic Fund to support the sectors and members of the public hard hit by the epidemic. In the first half of March when the epidemic became more serious, we acted promptly and implemented numerous measures to cope with the situation within a short period of time.

Major measures implemented by the Government to respond to the developments of the epidemic in the past month are set out in the following table.

Date	Event
28 February	Issuing the Red Outbound Travel Alert (OTA) on three regions in Italy, and issuing quarantine orders to people arriving Hong Kong who have been to the above three regions or to Iran where the Red OTA remains in force in the past 14 days (regardless of whether they are Hong Kong residents) starting from 1 March.
28 February	The Hospital Authority (HA) extended the Enhanced Laboratory Surveillance Programme to cover patients below 18 years old and those with fever or respiratory symptoms subject to clinical assessment of physician in charge.

2 March	Government bureaux/departments gradually resumed more public services with the implementation of targeted measures to reduce social contact and infection control measures.
4 March	Hong Kong residents returning to Hong Kong from the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Japan completed quarantine by batches. Nine of them were confirmed to be infected after returning to Hong Kong.
4-5 March	Sending four chartered flights to bring back a total of 469 Hong Kong residents stranded in Hubei Province to Hong Kong, and arranging them to stay in a quarantine centre.
8 March	Expanding the health declaration arrangements at the Hong Kong International Airport from inbound flights from the Mainland to all flights arriving Hong Kong.
9 March	The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) extended the Enhanced Laboratory Surveillance Programme to cover all private clinics and hospitals.
10 March	Issuing the Red OTA on some regions in France, Germany, Japan and Spain as well as on the entire country of Italy, and issuing quarantine orders to people arriving Hong Kong who have been to the above regions or countries in the past 14 days (regardless of whether they are Hong Kong residents) starting from 14 March.
13 March	Issuing the Red OTA on 26 European countries in the Schengen Area, and issuing quarantine orders to people arriving Hong Kong who have been to the above countries in the past 14 days (regardless of whether they are Hong Kong residents) starting from 17 March.
13 March	Announcing adjustments to the health quarantine arrangements on inbound travellers from overseas to reserve more quarantine facilities for the close contacts of confirmed cases.

14 March	Following three confirmed cases in Heng Tai House, Fu Heng Estate in Tai Po, some residents had to be evacuated to quarantine centres. Four environmental samples tested positive later.
15 March	Issuing the Red OTA on Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States, and issuing quarantine orders to people arriving Hong Kong who have been to the above countries or to Egypt where the Red OTA remains in force in the past 14 days (regardless of whether they are Hong Kong residents) starting from 19 March.
17 March	Issuing the Red OTA on all overseas countries/territories and issuing quarantine orders to people arriving Hong Kong who have been to the above countries/regions in the past 14 days (regardless of whether they are Hong Kong residents) starting from 19 March.
19 March	Hong Kong residents returning to Hong Kong from Hubei Province completed quarantine by batches. Only one of them was confirmed to be infected.
19 March	The CHP extended the Enhanced Laboratory Surveillance Programme to cover inbound travellers under quarantine from overseas. Priority was accorded to persons under quarantine aged 65 or above or persons under quarantine residing with elderly aged 65 or above.
19 March	To handle a large number of people arriving in Hong Kong via the Hong Kong International Airport, the HA established test centres at the AsiaWorld-Expo and the North Lantau Hospital. People arriving in Hong Kong with upper respiratory symptoms will undergo virus tests and wait for the laboratory results there. Subject to the test results, they will be admitted to hospital or subject to home quarantine.

20 March	The Immigration Department closely monitored anti-epidemic measures implemented by the Moroccan authorities and rendered assistance to Hong Kong residents stranded in the country.
21 March	<p>Announcing enhanced measures to control the disease, which include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The HA and the DH will fully utilize all resources for testing and enhance testing for people returning to Hong Kong from overseas; • resuming the special work arrangements for civil servants implemented before 2 March to provide limited-scale public services; • deferring the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education examination; • stepping up enforcement actions against contravention of quarantine orders; • strengthening disease prevention at residential care homes for the elderly and people with disabilities.
21 March	Announcing adjustments to the health quarantine arrangements on people arriving Hong Kong from Hubei Province (except Wuhan) to reserve more quarantine facilities for the close contacts of confirmed cases.

23 March	<p>Announcing more anti-epidemic measures, which include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • starting from 25 March, all non-Hong Kong residents coming from overseas countries and regions by plane will be denied entry to Hong Kong; non-Hong Kong residents coming from the Mainland, Macao and Taiwan will be denied entry to Hong Kong if they have been to any overseas countries and regions in the past 14 days; all transit services at Hong Kong International Airport will be suspended; and all travellers coming from Macao and Taiwan will be subject to compulsory quarantine; • Stepping up virus testing for arriving persons from the United Kingdom, other countries in Europe and the United States; • Taking stringent enforcement actions to combat breaches of quarantine orders; • Strengthening social distancing measures, including a proposal to introduce legislation to temporarily prohibit the sale and supply of alcoholic drinks by restaurants, bars and clubs.
24 March	Stepping up enforcement against breaches of quarantine orders and appealing to public to make use of the “e-Report Room” online platform to report breaches.
25 March	Sending the second batch of chartered flights to take Hong Kong residents stranded in Hubei Province back to Hong Kong.

We have adhered to the people-oriented principle throughout our anti-epidemic work and have proactively supported Hong Kong people affected by the epidemic. For example, we overcame all kinds of challenges to bring back Hong Kong people stranded in Hubei Province by batches; we sent a special team comprising immigration officers and healthcare officers to take care of the Diamond Princess cruise ship

passengers who stayed in Japan to receive medical treatment; and we provided support to Hong Kong residents who were stranded in Morocco and Peru. We also exercised discretion to extend the stay of carers on Two-way Permit in Hong Kong and prioritised the handling of Speedpost items containing surgical masks. We co-operated with the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions to deliver prescription medications to Hong Kong people in the Mainland and introduced flexible arrangement to extend the validity period of the contracts of foreign domestic helpers, etc.

We have also continued to uphold the principle of operating in an open and transparent manner in our anti-epidemic efforts. Through the daily press conferences by the CHP and the HA, media sessions by the Chief Executive and Secretaries of Departments and Directors of Bureaux, the designated website “coronavirus.gov.hk”, the Facebook pages of the CHP and “Tamar Talk”, the Interactive Map Dashboard, social media and more, we provide the public with the latest information on the disease and clarify rumours. The Interactive Map Dashboard is very popular and has attracted about 16 million views since its launch.

Fighting the virus together

In the face of the severe situation of the epidemic, I would like to once again thank all the healthcare and government anti-epidemic officers (including auxiliary forces, retired civil servants and volunteers) who fight the disease at the forefront. I would like to thank also the four professors on the Expert Advisory Panel and the research and development teams of universities and innovation and technology companies for making suggestions on the prevention and control of the disease as well as our citizens who have put up with the inconvenience in their daily lives to safeguard Hong Kong. All of them are our anti-epidemic heroes. The governing team and I will stay committed to our duties, remain calm and stay vigilant in our fight against the disease.

To win the battle against the disease, the continuous support and co-operation of every Hong Kong citizen are of utmost important. We

believe that a large number of Hong Kong citizens will continue to come back Hong Kong in the following weeks because of the worsening situation overseas and hence confirmed cases will inevitably continue to increase. The situation will be more severe and difficult to handle than any period in the past two months and may even lead to large-scale and continuous outbreak in the community. This is a critical moment in the fight against the disease and also a moment for testing the resilience of Hong Kong people in the face of the epidemic.

Fighting the virus is a long battle and the process is arduous. It is not easy to stay at home for a long period of time without normal activities and social interactions, but it is definitely not the time to let our guard down, otherwise the hard efforts of Hong Kong citizens in the past two months will be undone and the consequences could be dire. I appeal to all members of the public to continue to fight the disease together. I have no doubt that as long as we stay united, work together and support each other, Hong Kong will finally win the battle against the disease.

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