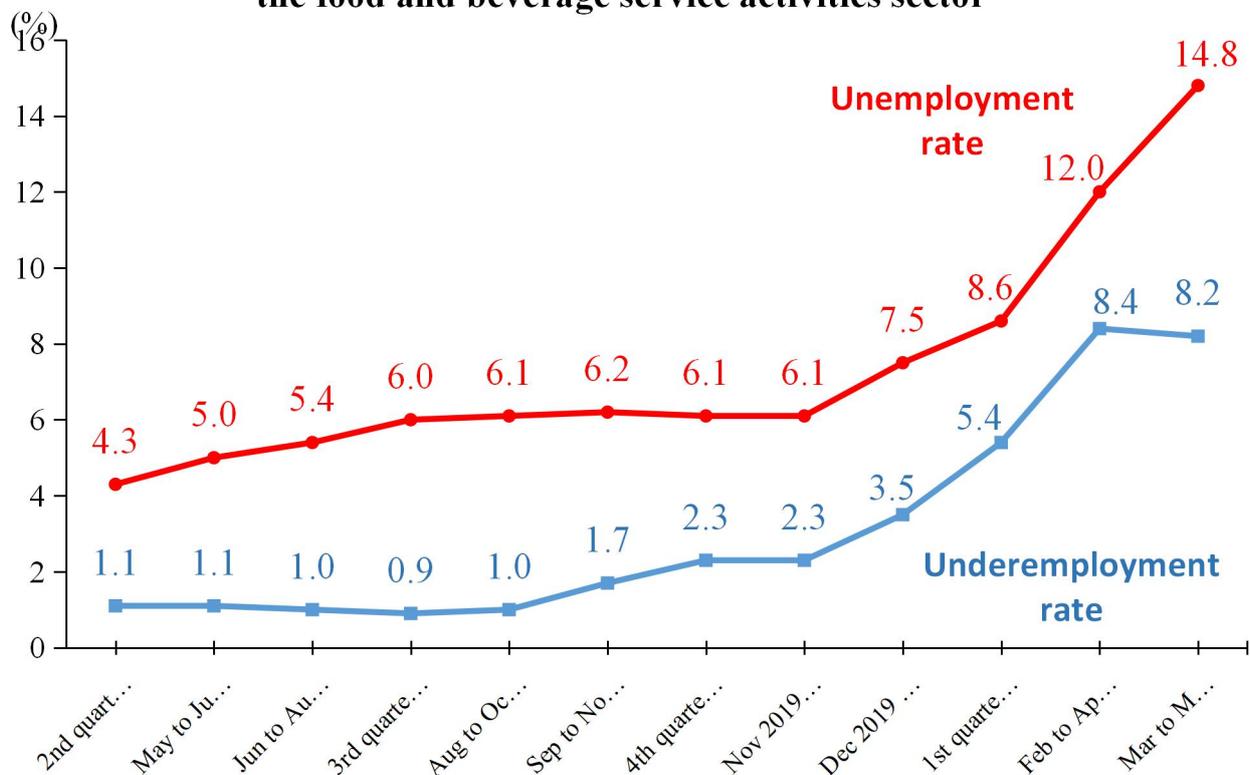


Resuming Activities after Fighting the Virus for Five Months

“Food is heaven to the people”. This well-known Chinese saying is particularly true in the case of Hong Kong which is a food paradise. The recent Father’s Day was the first Sunday after the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government lifted most social distancing measures affecting catering businesses. We were pleased to see that people went to restaurants to celebrate the day with family and friends, while restaurant owners and workers were much encouraged by the increase in business. Just as Hon. Tommy Cheung Yu-yan, the Legislative Council Member representing the catering sector said, it is hoped that catering businesses will employ more workers so that the unemployment rate of the catering industry can return to single digits.

**Unemployment and underemployment rates of
the food and beverage service activities sector**



The above phenomenon illustrates how the “Suppress and Lift” strategy adopted by the Government to prevent and control the epidemic is applied when Hong Kong’s epidemic situation has stabilised. Our city has entered a new phase of relaxing restrictions while keeping public health risks in check. Economic activities of all sorts have gradually resumed and people’s lives have generally returned to normal. However, lifting those restrictions does not mean letting down our guard. Before the advent and widespread application of effective vaccines, we still have to stay alert and be well-prepared to make prompt responses whenever necessary.

Developments of the epidemic

Hong Kong’s epidemic situation has remained stable with a total of 114 confirmed cases reported over the past month (from 25 May to 24 June). Among them, 102 were imported cases, involving Hong Kong residents returning from overseas with the largest number from Pakistan, the Philippines, India and Bangladesh or their close contacts. All cases were detected because of the testing of inbound travellers from overseas. Since we have adopted a “test and hold” strategy, i.e. inbound travellers can only leave a designated location after receiving the virus test result, the chance of the virus spreading into the community has been minimised.

However, during the period, the emergence of a local cluster of 12 confirmed cases, the source of which remains unknown, has caused considerable concerns. These 12 cases involved the family members, colleagues and residents living in the same housing block of the first confirmed patient. It was also the first time in Hong Kong that an ambulance officer was suspected of contracting the virus in the course of transporting an infected person to hospital. We were highly concerned as the scope of infection was rather broad. Staff and experts from the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) and relevant departments went to the scene immediately to conduct an inspection, trace contacts, carry out large-scale virus testing for high-risk people (including residents living in the same housing block, colleagues of the confirmed patients, etc.), as well as to step up cleaning of facilities. As five

confirmed patients were found to be living in the same units on different floors of the same block, for the sake of prudence, we evacuated 24 households living in those units to quarantine centres. In this cluster, the first case was confirmed on 31 May while the last one was confirmed on 13 June. Much to our relief, no more infections have since been detected. Unfortunately, two elderly residents who were infected passed away recently to become the fifth and sixth COVID-19 deaths in Hong Kong. I would like to express my sincere condolences to their families.

The intermittent emergence of local infection clusters reminds us once again of the presence of undetected infections in the community. It is imperative for the Government to step up virus testing to keep the epidemic in check through early identification, early isolation and early treatment.

Anti-epidemic efforts

As the local epidemic situation has remained generally stable, following the direction we started to take last month, we have continued to relax anti-epidemic measures in a moderate and phased manner. On social distancing, K3 to S5 students have all resumed classes; public facilities and business premises (including the two theme parks) previously closed have been allowed to reopen subject to fulfilment of infection control requirements; the number of persons allowed in group gatherings in public places has also been relaxed from 8 to 50. With a weak economy and a rising unemployment rate, such relaxations are timely; they also help meet people's aspiration to resume social life.

As recommended by our experts, we have been stepping up virus testing to ascertain the presence of the virus in the community. In the first half of June, an average of 4 000 virus tests a day were conducted by public institutions, an increase of over 60% compared with May. Our short-term target is to enhance the testing capacity of public institutions to 7 000 virus tests a day. With the introduction of a "health code" to be used for travelling between Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, and a "travel bubble" to be set up with specific overseas

countries, people’s demand for virus testing will increase significantly. The Department of Health (DH) is liaising with private institutions to help them enhance their testing capacity.

Major measures implemented by the Government in response to developments over the past month are set out below:

Date	Event
26 May	The Government announced that four types of business premises previously closed, including karaoke establishments, clubs or nightclubs, bathhouses and party rooms, could resume operation from May 29, subject to fulfilment of certain preventive measures, and transfer/transit services at the Hong Kong International Airport would resume starting from 1 June.
26 May	The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) announced that its performance venues would be reopened from 1 June and all Music Office music centres would reopen for full service on the same day.
27 May	S3 to S5 students resumed classes.
1 June	The CHP under the DH issued a letter to all private doctors to remind them to arrange virus tests for patients with respiratory symptoms or other symptoms, even if the symptoms were mild.
2 June	In view of the emergence of new local cases, the Government announced that the existing disease prevention regulations and restrictions on catering premises and scheduled premises would be maintained and group gatherings of more than 8 persons in public places would continue to be prohibited till 18 June. The expiry date of the legislation on compulsory quarantine arrangements applicable to inbound travellers from the Mainland, Macao, Taiwan and overseas would be extended.

8 June	P4 to S2 students resumed classes.
10 June	The LCSD announced that more public swimming pools, gazetted beaches, libraries and museums would be reopened. The arrangement of opening alternate courts/tables of badminton courts, billiard/American pool rooms and table tennis rooms would be relaxed and booking applications for some land recreation and sports facilities and wedding venues would resume.
15 June	K3 to P3 and S3 to S5 cross-boundary students resumed classes. Arrangements would be made for cross-boundary students to take school buses to travel directly between the boundary control points and schools.
16 June	The Government announced that some social distancing measures would be relaxed from 19 June for a period of 14 days till 2 July. The relaxation measures would include the following: the number of persons allowed in group gatherings in public places would be relaxed from 8 to 50; list of exempted group gatherings would be expanded to include catering business premises subject to relevant infection prevention measures and restrictions; social distancing measures at catering business premises and scheduled premises would be relaxed, i.e. the limit on the number of persons allowed to be seated together at one table at catering business premises would be removed; the number of persons allowed to be seated together at one table in bars/pubs would be increased from 4 to 8 persons; the limit on the number of persons at each facility/group/room at scheduled premises would be increased from 8 to 16 persons; live performances and dancing activities would be allowed to resume subject to relevant infection control measures.
17 June	The LCSD announced that more leisure and cultural facilities and venues, including pitches and children

	facilities would reopen.
--	--------------------------

18 June	In view of the latest COVID-19 situation in Beijing, the Government announced that all inbound travellers arriving at the Hong Kong International Airport from Beijing would be required to wait for test results at a designated location after submitting their deep throat saliva samples for virus testing and would be subject to compulsory home quarantine for 14 days should they test negative.
---------	--

Furthermore, the Government arranged several special flights in the past month to bring back home over 900 Hong Kong residents stranded in India and Nepal.

Striking the right balance

We are fully prepared to fight an enduring battle against the virus and will continue to adopt the “Suppress and Lift” strategy to strive for the right balance. I once used the description “three-way tug-of-war” to illustrate the need to consider the three factors of public health, economic impact and social acceptance when making adjustments to our control measures. Striking the right balance is not an exact science and is easier said than done. We have to consider various factors and then act decisively. That said, let me make it clear again that political considerations absolutely play no part in such assessments. Therefore, the allegation that prohibiting group gatherings of over 50 persons involves consideration of suppressing protests and demonstrations is totally groundless. As a matter of fact, a variety of large scale activities, including ball games, open concerts, and even the annual dragon boat races, etc. are affected by the same restriction.

Anti-epidemic supplies

To help our people to better fight this enduring battle, we arranged for free reusable masks, i.e. CuMask+™, to be provided for each Hong Kong citizen. The response was positive with a total of over 1.44

million registrations received during the one-month registration period, covering more than 3.93 million people. The masks have been delivered to recipients by Hongkong Post. The Government has also directly delivered the CuMask+™ to schools, residential homes and social welfare institutions for use by relevant individuals.

In addition, from next week, a pack of 10 disposable masks will be distributed to each residential address in Hong Kong. These masks are the first batch of masks procured by the Government under the Local Mask Production Subsidy Scheme. We would like to share these masks with our people as part of our collective fight against the virus.

Appealing for stability in Hong Kong

Battling this epidemic, I hope that people will cherish even more the hard-earned stable epidemic situation which has allowed us to revive our economy and improve local employment. In the same way, Hong Kong cannot stand chaos. Activities such as vandalism, advocating “Hong Kong independence”, illegal possession of explosives and firearms, etc. have clearly threatened national security. The enactment of legislation for safeguarding national security in the HKSAR by the Central Authorities at the state level is to plug the loophole in our legal system and enforcement mechanisms so as to restore stability to our society as soon as possible and better protect national security. It is the constitutional responsibility of the HKSAR to safeguard national security, and also the common obligation of nationals of the entire country, including Hong Kong people.

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