

Battling the Epidemic for Seven Months

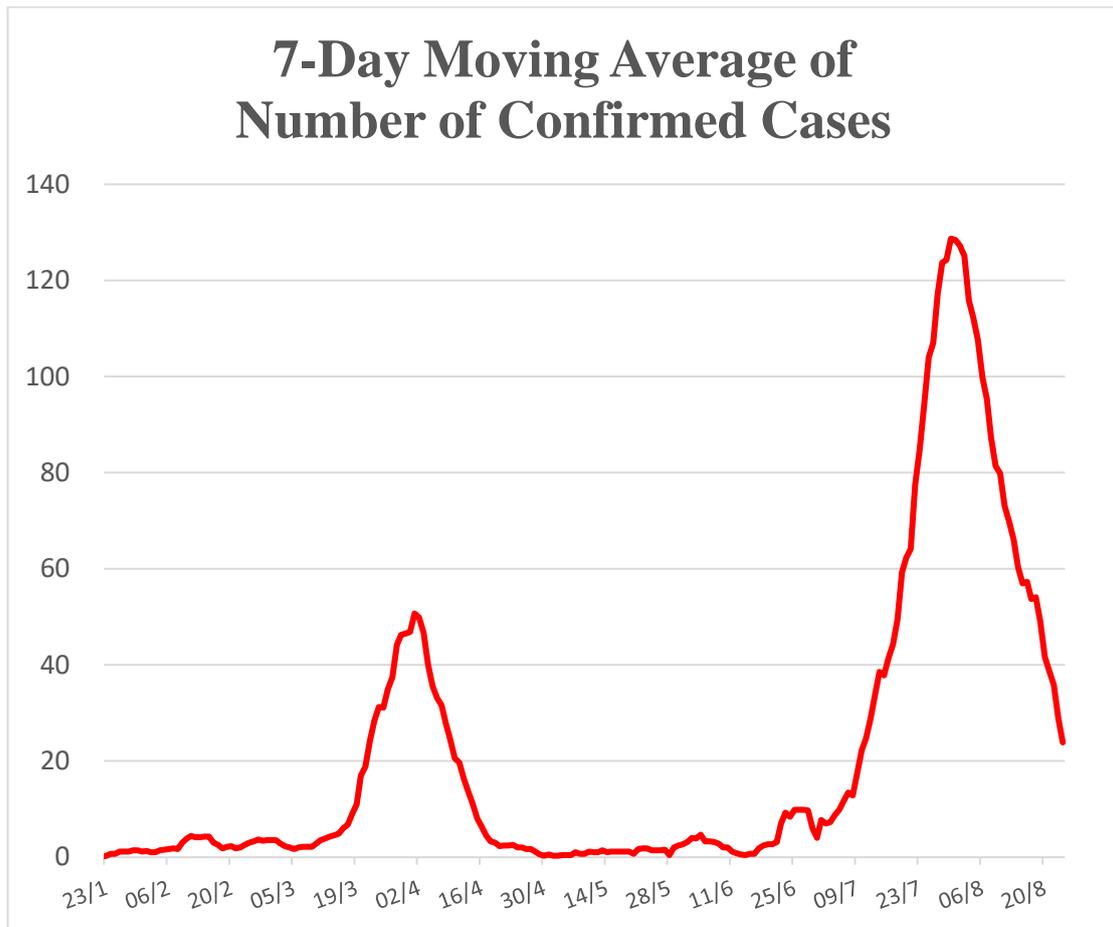
Fighting the Virus with Confidence

The third wave of the COVID-19 epidemic has lasted for almost two months since it started in early July. The way the epidemic has developed shows just how “cunning” (as described by some experts) the virus is, and has reminded us once again that we have to be psychologically prepared to live with this virus until an effective vaccine is developed and widely applied. Except yesterday (24 August) which recorded a single digit, daily local confirmed cases were still in the double digits in recent days and the sources of infection for close to 40% of these cases remain unknown. This suggests that there are still silent transmission chains in the community. As such, the Government is maintaining the most stringent social distancing measures adopted since the outbreak of the epidemic. They are almost beyond what businesses can bear and the public is showing increasing signs of “anti-epidemic fatigue”. Last Friday, when appealing for people to be patient, I said the Government would expeditiously complete a number of measures within a week. We hope that we will be able to adjust social distancing measures within a short period according to the prevailing epidemic situation to allow the gradual resumption of economic activities and people’s normal lives.

How the epidemic has developed

Similar to other places which initially successfully contained the virus, Hong Kong has experienced a severe resurgence since early July. For 12 consecutive days from July 22 to August 2, over 100 confirmed cases were recorded daily, most of them local cases and many with unknown sources of infections. The surge in confirmed cases caused a huge burden to the public hospital system as well as our healthcare workers. At one stage, over 200 confirmed patients were at home awaiting hospital admission. As collapse of the hospital system would

mean losing an important line of defence for our anti-epidemic work, we were deeply worried at that time. But we remained cool-headed to fight the epidemic. With our anti-epidemic workers standing fast at their posts, and our business sector and community gritting their teeth, the anti-epidemic measures have gradually yielded results. Despite occasional fluctuations, there has been a generally declining trend in the number of cases.



Unfortunately, since the infection clusters in this wave of the epidemic involve several elderly care homes, quite a number of the infected persons are elderly or chronic patients. As a result, there has been a marked increase in the death toll over the past month, with close to 60 patients passing away in a single month. I would like to express my sincere condolences to the families of the deceased. These deaths remind us once again that COVID-19 is extremely dangerous to the elderly. We must pay greater attention to the elderly, whether they are living at home or in care homes, and protect them from the virus.

Anti-epidemic efforts

In the past month, as the leader steering the anti-epidemic work, I made three very difficult decisions.

The first was to postpone the 2020 Legislative Council General Election, originally scheduled for September 6, 2020, for a year to protect public safety and public health as well as ensure elections are conducted openly and fairly. The grounds for making such a decision were explained in detail in my remarks at the press conference on July 31.

The second was to suspend the crew change arrangement for goods vessels and passenger vessels coming to Hong Kong. Due to the epidemic, tens of thousands of seafarers are stranded at sea. They cannot leave their vessels and go home and some are facing mental health problems. In addition, many workers waiting to board and work on the vessels are in difficulty as they cannot resume work due to the lack of connecting transport. Hong Kong had earlier responded positively to the strong appeals from the international maritime sector by allowing seafarers to enter the Hong Kong International Airport and Hong Kong Port for crew change under specific conditions on humanitarian grounds. However, to further reduce the risk of importing the virus from overseas, we had no alternative but to suspend this arrangement in late July.

The third decision was to bite the bullet every week and extend the stringent social distancing measures, especially those which are detrimental to the catering sector and the 14 types of closed business premises. Recently, I have received quite a lot of requests from people I know or do not know from the trades, expressing their hope that the Government could allow their businesses to resume operation. However, to strictly control the epidemic, I was unable to accede to their requests.

Although I had many discussions with my colleagues and would listen to the advice of experts in making the decisions, I understand that as the leader of the Government, I have an undeniable responsibility for the decisions made. “The buck stops here.”

The anti-epidemic measures are set out below chronologically:

Date	Event
July 29	The crew change arrangement for passenger vessels and goods vessels without cargo operation in Hong Kong was suspended, and the testing and quarantine arrangement for sea crew members, air crew members and other persons exempted from quarantine requirement arriving in Hong Kong was tightened.
July 29	A series of social distancing measures were tightened. These included prohibiting dine-in services in catering business premises all day (taking into account citizens' needs, dine-in services during the day were resumed the following day), incorporating sports premises and swimming pools into the list of scheduled premises requiring closure, reducing the number of persons allowed in group gatherings in public places from four to two and requiring a person to wear a mask at all times in public places, etc.
August 1	The Hospital Authority commenced operation of the community treatment facility (with a total of 500 beds) at Hall 1 of AsiaWorld-Expo (AWE) to admit confirmed patients with mild symptoms and stable conditions.
August 2	Seven members of the Mainland nucleic acid test support team arrived in Hong Kong to assist in the preparation work to help the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) with its virus testing work. Some 50 other members also arrived in Hong Kong on August 21 to join the work.
August 3	The Education Bureau announced that all face-to-face classes and on-campus activities would be suspended after the commencement of the new school term.

August 6	The Government implemented a series of measures to reduce the health risks faced by foreign domestic helpers staying in the boarding facilities of employment agencies. These included free virus testing, provision of masks, and processing quickly the applications for changing employers in Hong Kong from foreign domestic helpers whose employment contracts have expired.
August 7	The Government announced that with the staunch support of the Central Government, a large-scale Universal Community Testing Programme (UCTP) would be rolled out. In addition, a community treatment facility would be set up at AWE and a temporary hospital would be built in the vicinity. The Government would also expand the Targeted Group Testing Scheme to cover more people in higher-risk groups and high exposure sectors.
August 18	In view of the severe epidemic situation, the Government announced that Block 1, 2 and 3 of Chun Yeung Estate would continue to be used as quarantine centres.
August 20	The Government announced that it would gradually resume the provision of more basic public services from August 24 to meet the needs of the public and enterprises.
August 21	The Government gave a detailed account of its anti-epidemic work and announced the details of the three anti-epidemic programmes supported by the Central Government, including the UCTP to be started on September 1.

Central Government's support for HKSAR's anti-epidemic work

The Central Government has always shown great care for Hong Kong and has proactively responded to requests made by the HKSAR Government. We will make good use of the Central Government's support and carry out the following three tasks effectively and expeditiously, including launching the one-off UCTP on September 1 to provide voluntary virus testing services for all residents, completing the

community treatment facility at AWE within a few weeks, and building a temporary hospital on a piece of land near AWE within a few months.

The team leader of the Mainland nucleic acid test support team, Mr Yu Dewen, has said publicly that they would without hesitation give whatever assistance Hong Kong needed. This simple yet powerful statement exactly reflects the support of the Central Government for the HKSAR and Hong Kong people. Even in times when the Mainland was grappling with the severe epidemic, the Central Government had been providing supplies to Hong Kong and assisting Hong Kong residents stranded in the Mainland and overseas to return to Hong Kong. The epidemic situation in the Mainland is now more stable than that in Hong Kong. Mainland citizens have not said anything like “borders must be closed”, “spreading virus” or “having ulterior motives”, which are often said by some Hong Kong politicians to smear others. Instead, they give even greater support to Hong Kong. Members of the Mainland support team who have come to work in Hong Kong also have great respect for the system in Hong Kong. All the work is conducted in accordance with the laws and regulations in Hong Kong, fully reflecting Hong Kong’s special status under “One Country, Two Systems”. Looking at the Central Government’s altruistic support for Hong Kong, those who keep taking every chance to discredit the Central Government and damage the relationship between the HKSAR and the Central Government should be ashamed of themselves.

Fighting the epidemic together with confidence

With the anti-epidemic experience gained over the past eight months, Hong Kong has strengthened its capability in various areas, including virus testing, tracing of sources of infections, quarantine facilities, treatment facilities, production of protective equipment and application of technology. Coupled with the support of the Central Government, the HKSAR will have a greater ability to deal with another wave of the epidemic down the road. The process of fighting the epidemic is undoubtedly hard, but I hope that members of the public will continue to have confidence in Hong Kong, not let down their guard and help each other to get through the epidemic together.

Now, a key task that requires our concerted efforts and everyone's active participation is the UCTP which aims to identify asymptomatic patients in the community to further curb the epidemic. Please rest assured that the test is safe, convenient and will not infringe on individual's privacy. I urge the public to actively sign up for and participate in the UCTP for the sake of themselves, others and Hong Kong.

Mrs Carrie Lam
Chief Executive
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

25 August 2020