

SCED speaks on Hong Kong-Singapore Air Travel Bubble

Following is the transcript of remarks by the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Edward Yau, on the Hong Kong-Singapore Air Travel Bubble at a media session today (November 21):

Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development: We have planned to launch the Hong Kong-Singapore Air Travel Bubble tomorrow, but in the light of the recent upsurge of local cases, we have decided together with the Singapore Government to defer the launching of the Air Travel Bubble by two weeks. Under the agreed arrangement, we have got certain mechanisms and dialogues on this. In the interest of making a good start and avoiding confusion for passengers, we have decided to put this back for two weeks. So doing is necessary to avoid any inconvenience caused by the abrupt changes of the scheme to passengers, particularly those who need to return to Hong Kong in short time. We will review the situation and keep each other well informed of the epidemic situation, so as to decide the way forward. We will make a further announcement by early December on the formal launching of the scheme.

Reporter: Do you have an estimate of how many passengers will be affected by the delay of the travel bubble scheme? Are you worried that there will be further delay given the worsening situation of COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong? You earlier said that Hong Kong is in talks with over 11 countries over possible travel bubble scheme, how's the progress of these talks and do they have to be suspended as well?

Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development: First and foremost, we are talking about deferring and putting back the inaugural flights of the scheme by two weeks. We still aim at putting the scheme in place, provided that we are satisfied with the public health considerations being fulfilled. We will continue to review the situation with the Singapore Government.

As for talks with other places, they are also watching the progress of the Hong Kong-Singapore one. I believe the most important thing is that for any scheme to be successful, it must fulfill the condition of securing public health and making sure that both sides would be comfortable and feel safe about the scheme. In the light of the situation in Hong Kong, I think it is a responsible way to put this back for a while and then relaunch it at a suitable juncture.

Reporter: How many passengers will be affected?

Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development: Under the scheme, our original plan is that in the initial two weeks, there will one flight per day with a capacity of up to 200 (passengers). That's roughly the situation, depending on when we can relaunch it. That's the calculation.

Reporter: Who initiated the deferral of the travel bubble, is it by Hong Kong or Singapore as Singapore asked to have the PCR test upon landing this morning? Are you sure that the Air Travel Bubble can take flights after two weeks? Do you think that the two authorities are doing enough to safeguard the public health and safety of passengers? For the people who bought tickets right now, what will happen to them? Are they still allowed to travel and if they still proceed with their journey, what are the measures they need to take upon landing in Singapore?

Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development: We have been talking about the launching of Air Travel Bubble with Singapore for some months. We agreed in principle, worked out the details and made suitable announcements recently. At the same time, both governments are also looking at the situation on a daily basis. Particularly in the light of Hong Kong's situation, I think it is a responsible way for us to touch base again. At this particular moment, we have mutually agreed to put this scheme back by two weeks. This would allow us to review the situation and to have Hong Kong's new wave (of COVID-19 outbreak) settled a bit. This is also in line with the spirit of the entire arrangement that if circumstances do not permit, we will have to make suitable adjustments. I think we have made in the outset. That is exactly to fulfill the very important purpose of taking public health as the pre-requisite and making sure that this arrangement will be safe and comfortable by both sides.

As to the passengers affected, there are usual arrangements for refund or ticket adjustments to be made by the travel agents or the airlines. This will be taken care of in the usual manner.

(Please also refer to the Chinese portion of the transcript.)