

Transcript of remarks by SCMA on second batch of chartered flights to bring back Hong Kong people stranded in Hubei

The following is the transcript of remarks made by the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, Patrick Nip, this morning (March 16) at a media session at the Central Government Offices on the sending of the second batch of chartered flights by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government to bring back Hong Kong people stranded in Hubei.

Reporter: For next Tuesday, that means you will take full two months for the second batch of chartered flights to take back the people in Hubei, is that too little too late? My second question is about the local quarantine facilities, with people around the world, especially in America and Europe, all trying to rush back, and on Tuesday everybody coming back will need to be quarantined. Are there enough quarantine facilities to house that many people?

Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs: Thank you very much for your two questions. Actually your second question also pointed out the difficulties or challenges we are facing in arranging Hong Kong people stranded in Hubei to return to Hong Kong. As I said before, on the very first day we received requests for assistance, we have already started planning for their return and we took into account the epidemic situation in the Mainland and Hong Kong, our quarantine facility capacity as well as the impacts on our healthcare system, etc. At the right time, we kick-started the first batch of operation on the 4th and 5th of March. Right after the completion of the first operation, we have started the preparation for the second batch of operation. We have done whatever we can and whatever possible to take as many as possible Hong Kong people stranded in Hubei back to Hong Kong. But I hope you would appreciate that in arranging these operations, we have to take into account the situation in the Mainland and Hong Kong, all the challenges in the logistical arrangements – how to reduce the public health and cross-infection risks, the quarantine facility capacity and also the impacts on the healthcare system, etc.

Regarding your question about the capacity of our quarantine centres, at present we have about 700 quarantine places available. I think by next Tuesday, the first batch of returnees from Hubei will have completed their 14 days of quarantine and will leave the quarantine centre. In devising the second batch of operation, we have already taken into account, and actually assessed very carefully, our quarantine centre capacity. Of course, the epidemic situation worldwide is changing very rapidly. That's why we have to monitor very closely and act very prudently. We hope that we could plan the operation in detail, execute it smoothly, and have sufficient quarantine facilities to quarantine these returnees. We will continue to monitor the

situation and ensure that there will be sufficient quarantine places, especially reserving for those who are close contacts of confirmed cases and who are required to stay in quarantine centres.

Reporter: Can I confirm with you that other than next Tuesday, there are also some chartered flights on the coming Wednesday? My second question concerns the infection and quarantine facilities, because there is basically only one infected, out of the 400 returned evacuees from Wuhan, would you in future consider sending some of them for home quarantine as the risk is relatively manageable? Would this second batch of evacuees place much pressure on the existing quarantine sites? There are some parties suggesting using some of the airports in the other parts of Hubei, is the talk going on? Is it feasible? Would you look into that?

Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs: As regards to your first question, the earliest time for the departure of the second batch of chartered flights would be next Tuesday. As regards the number of flights and the days of operation, it very much depends on the final outcome of registration. When we confirm the final number of returnees, we will then allocate sufficient number of flights and know the number of days to implement the operation.

Regarding your second question on quarantine facilities and quarantine requirements, for the returnees from Hubei, same as the first batch, they would be transferred to the quarantine centres for 14 days of quarantine. This is because Hubei, particularly Wuhan, has been an infected area, and these returnees have been staying there for a considerable period of time. For prudence's sake and for controlling the public health risks, I think it is appropriate to make such arrangements. Of course, we need to continue to monitor the situation and seek the experts' advice as regards the level of risks and also the most appropriate quarantine measures for various groups. The situation is changing and we have to monitor closely and to base the measures on science and public health experts' advice.

On your third question, we have been considering all possibilities, including airports in the western part of Hubei Province and other transport means, but based on the experience of the first batch of operation, we have come to the conclusion that using the Wuhan Tianhe International Airport as the base is the most operationally feasible and efficient, and in terms of managing risks, it would be the most appropriate means. After the completion of the second batch of operation, we will of course review the situation and consider the best way forward.

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