

Transcript of remarks of press conference on anti-epidemic measures (with photo/video)

The Chief Executive (CE), Mrs Carrie Lam, held a press conference on anti-epidemic measures this morning (March 25). Also joining was the Acting Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Jack Chan. Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference:

Reporter: I have three questions for you. The first question is on caring for the elderly, because in the latest meeting with the Hong Kong Government, Mainland experts again warned about the low vaccination rate among those aged 70 or above. So, looking back, do you think that the Government should have adopted much more aggressive measures earlier such as the Vaccine Pass? And apart from aiming at increasing the vaccination rate to 90 per cent by the end of next month, is there more to be done? The second question concerns the aviation industry, because it's reported that representatives from 11 airlines wrote to you, urging you to scrap COVID tests for aircrew and learn from the Mainland's closed-loop arrangement for the staff. So would you consider their suggestion? Is there any room to, when would you announce more details about adjusting the route-suspension mechanism? And thirdly, for the CE Election, the nomination period will start in nine days, so when would you make up your mind whether to enter the race, and do you think you have a high chance of being the preferred candidate? Are you worried that the Government's work would be hindered if the CS (Chief Secretary for Administration) or the FS (Financial Secretary) resign from their positions? Thank you.

Chief Executive: Three questions. First of all, in my various meetings with the Mainland experts, this issue of the elderly was often raised. This is understandable because of the large number of deaths in the fifth wave of this epidemic, and over 90 per cent of them are old people and over half of them were old people living in residential care homes. It is only right for the Mainland experts to share more experiences and advice with us. It is now very obvious and very clear that the one single reason for the high mortality of elderly people in Hong Kong is the low vaccination rate, because all the facts and statistics, locally and worldwide, have shown that the COVID-19 vaccine is very effective in preventing critical illness and avoiding deaths. I'm afraid that there could be no looking-back. You can say a lot of things with the benefit of hindsight but if you look at all the press releases, media conferences, appeals and messages and APIs (Announcements in the Public Interest) and publicity that the Hong Kong SAR Government has done since late February last year when we started the Government COVID-19 Vaccination Programme, the focus was always on the elderly.

We actually started with the elderly before allowing the younger adults to get the jab. Everywhere in the world they started with the elderly because they have already gone through that very painful process of seeing elderly

people admitted into hospital, rushing into ICUs (intensive care units), putting on ventilation and then dying. We have seen it and we have appealed to the people. We can only say it is unfortunate for the whole of Hong Kong to miss what we now call the golden opportunity to get the old people vaccinated in time to prevent this tragic incident. And that's why I was very aggrieved and actually very angry when as recently as a few days ago, a local newspaper was still presenting headlines which were misleading, which will immediately give the old people, their relatives and the whole community the wrong message about getting the Sinovac vaccine.

We all have a responsibility. I'm not shedding my responsibility as the Chief Executive. I'm shouldering the primary responsibility for the fight against the epidemic, but everyone should also bear in mind that Hong Kong is a very free society, a very diverse society, and there are a lot of forces at work to prevent the Government from doing what should have been done – in this case vaccinating our old people. But we'll continue to do it. We have set very clear targets to achieve. We are visiting all the elderly homes again for a second and third time in the coming month in order to get those who have received the first dose to get the second dose. About 40 per cent, being those who were infected could not get a jab; then through the second and the third visits, they may be then ready to take the vaccination. And I've just heard that there are suggestions that we should give old people a choice of taking the BioNTech vaccine and I have just asked the Secretary for the Civil Service to give this full consideration in order to induce or attract more old people and their family members to allow us to get them vaccinated as soon as possible.

The second question about the airlines. Yes, I have received a letter from the airlines, which the Transport and Housing Bureau is now examining. We will do what is reasonable, but the prerequisite is we should protect Hong Kong from importation of cases from abroad, because as you have heard the World Health Organization, the pandemic is still quite serious in different parts of the world and we should not let our guard down in order to ensure that Hong Kong could come out of this fifth wave as soon as possible. As for the outstanding issues relating to the lifting of the place-specific flight suspension from April 1, the route-specific flight suspension, as well as the availability of designated quarantine hotels, we already had some internal deliberations and I'm sure that the relevant bureau, which I think in this case will be the Food and Health Bureau, will make the necessary announcements as and when they are ready.

The third question, I have no answer for you except to reiterate that according to the laws of Hong Kong, the nomination period for the next-term Chief Executive Election will still be April 3. Thank you.

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

