

SCED speaks on "travel bubbles"

Following is the transcript of remarks by the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Edward Yau, on "travel bubbles" at a media session today (October 15):

Reporter: Can the "travel bubble" be implemented during November or December this year? Do we have to wait for the border between Hong Kong and Mainland to open first before the "travel bubble" can be officially launched? My second question is what would happen if there are imported cases from Singapore to Hong Kong? What are the protocols to be put in place? Will we have a break or a suspension for the "travel bubble"? My third question is with the "travel bubble" starting to be announced, is it fair to expect that Hong Kong will keep all the borders closed (to all visitors) unless they are residents or they are in the "travel bubble", until a vaccine is proven to work throughout next year?

Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development: For the first question, I think we are doing this initially on a bilateral basis. We have approached or have been approached altogether by 11 countries to start bilateral arrangements to revive travelling. In the process, Singapore and Hong Kong are among the first partners that are able to lock in a mutually agreeable arrangement, whereby after fulfilling certain conditions, essentially mutually recognised COVID-19 tests and bubble flights with no transit passengers coming in ensured, travellers are allowed to come or go under this arrangement. We have to proceed with this on a bilateral basis. Whenever there is a mutual agreement between Hong Kong and our partners, we will proceed along with that. So there is not any magic on the sequencing because different countries might have different considerations of their own and the epidemic situations also vary. We ourselves in July suffered a community outbreak, and it has therefore put back some of the discussions. So we will move along this line: whenever the situation allows and whenever the conditions are mutually agreed, we will proceed on that basis.

Your second question is about what if circumstances turn worse. As I mentioned in one of the five conditions, these arrangements could be adjusted, relaxed if situation improves, reduced in order to minimise risks or suspended in circumstances that we don't feel comfortable. There are mechanisms to handle those (circumstances), and it will be mutually guided by our public health experts as well.

As to your last question, I think nobody throughout the world can say for certain when everything can resume as normal. Somebody said when vaccines come out, we will see light at the end of the tunnel, but to what extent the vaccine will be widely applied to allow us to have that sense of comfort, I think nobody can have a crystal ball on the timing. In the meantime, that's why it is important for us to move at the same time on various ways to revive normal travelling as much as possible, provided that we can track the virus. The set of conditions that has been agreed between Hong Kong and Singapore could be a milestone, where we both feel that by fulfilling these conditions, we would be able to track the virus, through these tests and arrangements, but at the same time, we should make it as facilitating as possible so that travellers can resume some level of travelling without too much hassle. So I think this is a compromise, a balancing act between these two constraints.

Reporter: Mr Yau, can you say at this moment when is the earliest possible date for this "travel bubble" to kick-in? This is my first question. Secondly, would it at all be depending on the virus situation, say, if the epidemic of both places remains the same, or if it spikes up? Would it be too much of a hassle for you to suspend for a week and then bring it back on? How sensitive would the arrangement be to the epidemic situation? Those are my two questions. Thank you.

Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development: For the first question, I think it is an important milestone that we have reached an agreement with the Singapore side to proceed on this framework. The remaining work is to finalise all the details with a view to allowing people to travel through this bubble arrangement as soon as possible. I mentioned in the press release that we hope to use the coming few weeks to put in place all these requirements which involve certain legislative amendments, arrangements with airports and airlines, and also mutual recognition of testing protocol, etc. We hope that all these could be done within the coming few weeks. If we are able to finish it earlier, then, of course, travelling can be resumed much earlier.

For your second question, in establishing the air (travel) bubble, it must be premised on the common objective of the virus being able to be contained through all the control measures, i.e. it is safe and low-risk. So this is the prerequisite, and that's why among the five criteria, we put in certain requirements on that. It is also premised on a situation where both sides feel comfortable with the epidemic situation, particularly the containment on the other side. So these are all factors that we are considering and being kept under review. That's why we have also agreed on an arrangement that this bubble arrangement could be adjusted in the light of the situation.

It could be further relaxed if both sides feel more comfortable, or see an obvious improvement in the containment of the virus. But if the circumstances are somehow unable to allow us to do so, then there would be mechanisms for us to adjust it, reduce it, or if really need be, (initiate) a temporary suspension. These are the mechanisms that are based on science, based on the situation, and in fact, also taking on this very important balancing act between containment and facilitation.

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

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