

Remarks by Minister Lawrence Wong, Co-chair of the Multi-Ministry Taskforce on Wuhan Coronavirus, at the Ministerial Press Conference on the Wuhan Coronavirus at National Press Centre, 10.15am

Good morning. The Government has been monitoring the situation since we first heard news of the Wuhan virus. We have a comprehensive plan in place, including contingencies for different scenarios and we have implemented the necessary measures proactively and swiftly.

This is a new virus – not much is known about this. The situation is – as all of you know – developing rapidly with new information and news coming out of China everyday. The situation is dynamic and fluid. We fully expect that we have to fully adjust and recalibrate our plans and measures over time. The key is to be able to adjust and recalibrate swiftly. I want to assure Singaporeans that the government will do everything we can to protect Singaporeans in Singapore. But this does not mean overreacting or worse, turning xenophobic. We must be proactive and rational in our response, and base our actions on the available evidence and data. That is why we formed the Ministerial Task Force on 22 Jan and we met the very next day. Both Minister Gan and I met many members of the media to highlight what we have done.

At our very first meeting, we decided to step up our overall posture – we extended travel advisory from avoiding travel to Wuhan to avoiding travel to the entire Hubei province, and we extended checks to our land and sea checkpoints – from the airports to the land and sea checkpoints.

As Minister Gan had said, today, given the continued worsening of the situation, we have decided there is a need for a further step up in our measures. Our aim is to minimise the risk of more imported cases; to contain and isolate the identified cases; and to minimise the chances of the virus spreading within Singapore. We try to minimise the number of imported cases, we are mentally prepared that that number will rise but we will try as far as possible to reduce that. Each time we detect, we contain, we isolate it and we minimise the chances of this spreading within our local community – that is what we are aiming to do. So what are the enhanced measures?

First, we will extend travel advisory to defer all non-essential travel to the rest of China with immediate effect. We are doing this now, because of the latest developments in China, which the Chinese government itself have described as “grave”. They have also said that the virus is getting stronger and infections will continue to rise. Also given Singapore’s status as an international transport hub, we believe this extended travel advisory is a necessary safeguard against further spread of the virus.

Second, we will enhance screening efforts at our air checkpoints. We will deploy thermal scanners at the piers of the airport to cover all incoming flights into Changi airport. So it will not just be for flights from China because some travellers may have transited through other countries.

For inbound flights from China, we will forward deploy healthcare teams at the aerobridges to identify passengers who look unwell because fever may not be present for all cases. There will be signboards clearly displayed at these aerobridges

to channel travelers who feel unwell or who have recently been to Hubei to these healthcare teams. Additionally, we will pay attention to PRC travelers holding Chinese passports issued in Hubei. The numbers are coming down because of the outbound restrictions from China itself. We will monitor closely and ICA will pull them aside if they are holding such passports, ensure that they are well and get them to provide all their contact details, and we will continue to keep watch when they are in Singapore. That is our second measure.

Third, we will take extra precautions for those returning from China. We're doing this now, and we are getting ready now because we fully expect more to come back after the CNY holidays. From Tuesday (28 Jan) onwards, students who return from China will be given a leave of absence for 14 days, so they can stay at home and minimise close contact with others. Minister Ong will elaborate further on some of these measures.

For working adults returning from China, we advise employers to collect health and travel declarations from their workers, and ensure that they monitor their temperatures daily, and see the doctor immediately if they have any symptoms.

On top of this basic requirement, we will need differentiated measures for different sectors, in order to protect the well-being of Singaporeans, and also ensure business continuity. We are deploying a differentiated strategy.

For sectors where there is close and sustained contact with vulnerable groups, including children and the elderly, the employers should institute 14 days leave of absence for their returning workers from the day of return. We've identified three sectors where this will apply – in healthcare, education and eldercare. We will put this measure in place for all government-operated and government-funded entities in these three sectors. For private employers, the relevant government agencies will be following up with them to get this measure implemented.

For the other sectors, we will strongly advise employers to keep a close watch over their returning workers and take a risk-based approach depending on the nature of the work. For example, some can arrange for telecommuting to allow returning employees to work from home first. In fact, our public transport companies have decided to temporarily deploy bus drivers returning from China to non-public-facing jobs for some time until after the incubation period. So there can be different ways to manage the risks; and government agencies will work with the respective business representatives and industry associations to take the appropriate measures.

Minister Chan will also touch on this later on.

These are three major moves we are making now – they are appropriate and necessary to protect ourselves. These will not be the end of the measures we make. We will continue to monitor the rapidly evolving situation – as I said just now, it is dynamic and fluid – and we will implement additional measures as necessary.

We have no evidence yet of community spread in Singapore. We have no evidence that there is community spread of this virus in Singapore. But it may happen and if it does, we stand ready to take additional measures.

As I said before, and Minister Gan said earlier too, we are putting in place many layers of defence to protect ourselves and protect Singapore. The most important defence is still at the individual level. To beat the virus, it is not enough for the government alone to act. Singaporeans must do their part too. Be socially responsible. See a doctor if you are sick. Wear a mask if you are ill to protect those around you, including your family members and loved ones. Practise good personal hygiene practices. Washing your hands frequently is of utmost importance to minimise the possibility of picking up the virus. It is also important to stay calm and carry on with our lives. We do not know how long this will last.

Let us not fall prey to false rumours or succumb to panic. Let us not be afraid. In terms of information, refer to MOH's website and the gov.sg's WhatsApp for official updates on the latest situation. We will do everything we can to put out information accurately and in a timely manner so that Singaporeans have access to this information. Minister Iswaran will also touch on this later.

All in all, we have our plans in place. We have to be psychologically prepared to overcome this particular issues. We've confronted many challenges before. We've defeated SARS. We can and we will overcome this together.

My colleagues will now provide some additional details on their respective areas.