

Remarks by Minister Lawrence Wong, Co-chair of the Multi-Ministry Taskforce on Covid-19, at a Media Doorstop at National Press Centre on 3 Mar 2020

We have been monitoring the virus situation very closely, and as all of you know, it is spreading very quickly to countries everywhere. And Singapore, as a small, open city connected to the world, we face a higher risk of imported cases. That's why the Taskforce has decided to take additional precautions for travel in and out of Singapore.

For outgoing travellers, we are putting an advisory to defer all non-essential trips to Iran, Northern Italy, Japan and the whole of the Republic of Korea. For incoming travellers, we will not allow visitors who have had recent travel history from Iran, Northern Italy and the Republic of Korea. We have not included Japan in the incoming restrictions because the number of infected cases in Japan at this stage is still lower compared to the other countries. For Japan, we are managing the risk by having an advisory on outgoing trips at this juncture. For the incoming visitors, the restrictions are for the three places I highlighted. For citizens, residents and long-term pass holders returning to Singapore, we will issue them a Stay-Home Notice. These are the new travel restrictions that we are putting in place.

In addition, we are putting in place a new screening mechanism at our checkpoints, because we know that temperature scanners alone are not sufficient. We will now also identify, look out for people with respiratory symptoms, identify them, and request that they take a swab test in order to test whether they are positive for the virus. Those are additional precautions that we are taking, both in terms of travel as well as the checks at our borders.

I would to highlight though, that despite our very best efforts, we have to be mentally prepared for the number of infected cases in Singapore to go up. We have been used to, I think the experience so far these past few days in Singapore where the number of cases rises by just a handful everyday, we've become accustomed to it in a way. But this may not be the norm and it can change very easily. You see this in other countries too, where you have very few cases for a few days and then suddenly, one incident occurs, one event occurs, and there is a sharp spike in cases and sustained transmission. This has happened elsewhere; it can happen in Singapore too.

Some then ask if this can happen, what's the point of having all these restrictions? The answer is that the border controls are still useful at this stage of the epidemic, because we can still identify where the sources of risk are, and we can take appropriate measures to reduce the risk from these infected sources. By doing so, we flatten the epidemic curve in Singapore. We buy ourselves time and we avoid a situation where our hospitals get overwhelmed by a sudden surge of cases. So this is useful, but we have to be prepared that at some stage, the border controls alone would not be sufficient and we cannot stop the virus at our borders because the virus will spread to countries everywhere around us.

Even in countries where they do not report a lot of cases, there may well be undetected cases, virus infections going around. We will be exposed at that stage to multiple waves of infection and we have to be ready for that. We cannot stop it from happening. The only way to stop it is if you were to isolate and shut ourselves out from the world. But I don't think that's a tenable situation, so we have to be prepared that the number

of infected cases may go up, which goes back to the earlier point I said, that we have to be mentally prepared that there may be new spikes in the number of infection cases here in Singapore, as has happened in other countries.

We do have to redouble our efforts, not just focusing on border controls, but increasingly on what we can do within Singapore itself. We have been highlighting the need to take all the precautions like maintaining good hand hygiene, upholding higher standards of personal hygiene, as well as public hygiene in common areas, in public areas, hawker centres, in places that we go to. These are of vital importance. The need for individuals to take responsibility when you're sick, to go and see a doctor quickly, and to abide by the doctor's MC and stay at home if you have an MC. I think these are all very important. We should not think they are "good to have" – they are all of vital importance in order to slow down the spread of the virus in Singapore. So the taskforce is looking at what other measures we can do to strengthen this aspect of work beyond just looking at border controls – what more we can do within Singapore. We will be putting out more announcements and details in due course.