

Remarks by Minister Lawrence Wong, Co-chair of the Multi-Ministry Taskforce on COVID-19, at Press Conference on COVID-19 at National Press Centre on 20 March 2020

As all of you know, we are facing a wave of imported cases, most of whom are returnees – meaning to say that they are Singapore residents, and we have tightened our rules to require all of them to self-isolate for 14 days. That is one line of defence which we have tightened, and we will continue to enforce rigorously. We hope all Singaporeans who are subject to the Stay-Home Notice will do their part, be responsible, and take the necessary precautions to self-isolate themselves during the full 14-day period.

The next line of defence is contact tracing, where we continue to identify, quarantine and ringfence any isolated clusters. We are doing this very rigorously, and now we have this new app. We can leverage on technology to make this work better.

Finally, the third line of defence that we have to do is to step up our measures on safe distancing. We have to do this more rigorously than what we are doing today in order to protect ourselves. We have to do more stringent measures, which we are announcing today, and it cannot just be business as usual.

What do we hope to achieve from all of this? We would like to see, when all of these measures are in place, (with) fewer people out and about, a reduction in social gatherings or any activity involving close contact that can be a potential vector for transmission of the virus. So you see, the measures that we are announcing today go beyond the previous advisories and guidelines. We are now requiring for all events to abide by the 250 persons rule. Anything beyond that should not be carried out at all.

All large-scale gatherings have to be less than 250 people in size, and even then, they have to ensure adequate distance apart when the participants or attendees are seated. That is for events – beyond events, we are also talking about schools. We have already announced some measures for schools, which MOE had highlighted yesterday. Workplaces – we are calling on all employers to get employees, their staff, to work on telecommuting or work from home. So as a default option, all employers should seek to do that. If that is not possible, then the employees will have to come to office, but put them on staggered hours so that they do not all come at the same time and leave at the same time. There are different hours for which they can come and leave the office, preferably not during the peak period for transport. So if we do that, there will be more people working from home, and we can also reduce the load on public transport.

For public venues as well, we are going to enforce safe distancing across the board – in entertainment venues, attractions, restaurants, F&B outlets, hawker centres, coffeeshops – which means that people will have to be seated one metre apart. There will be restaurants where they may have to rearrange and reconfigure their tables in order to ensure adequate distance across the diners.

We recognise that all these will have significant costs to our F&B operators who are already facing very difficult times during this crisis. But this is a necessary precaution, which we have to put in place to protect Singaporeans and the people around us. We have been working with all the F&B outlets in order to put these measures in place, to ensure that whether it is a hawker centre, coffee shop or restaurant, there will be a safe distance between diners. And through licensing, we will enforce this.

Doing this does not mean that everyone has to cook and eat at home – you can still go out and support your favourite hawker stall or restaurant. But if the place is full now because of more limited capacity, then “dabao” – buy takeaway, bring it back home to eat. So it does not mean you have to cook all the time – you can still go out and support our local businesses,

buy food, takeaway for home. These are a range of very stringent, safe distancing measures, which we are putting in place. They are quite far-reaching, and should lead to a change in outcomes from where we are today. We cannot continue with business as usual activities.

With all these measures in place, what do we hope to achieve? We don't want to see crowded venues, we don't want to see packed event halls. We should see more people working from home, ordering takeaway to eat at home. All this means a major change in our daily routines and lives.

We need Singaporeans to cooperate. We will be enforcing these rules. It will lead to some inconvenience, but we will need Singaporeans to cooperate and take responsibility for these changes. If we are all disciplined about this, it will give us better control over the situation, and enable us to suppress and slow down the spread of the virus. So we hope all Singaporeans will work with us – do our part to protect ourselves, our families, our friends and the people around us.