

**HONG KONG'S FIFTH WAVE OF
COVID-19**

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Executive Summary

1. Hong Kong has always stood in unison with Beijing on its “zero-COVID” policy that had some successes in the past; rare outbreaks were quickly identified by contact tracing and social distancing, movement restrictions, large-scale testing and quarantine measures were strictly implemented.
2. Before the coronavirus fifth wave, Hong Kong had less than 200 new cases daily, a situation that was still manageable based on its existing procedures. However, the magnitude of the fifth wave has pushed the coping mechanism to the limit.
3. The large number of incoming patients has constrained hospital space leading to wanting hygiene levels, distressed medical health workers and anxieties at not being able to dispense good quality care to patients.
4. To mitigate the situation, the Hong Kong authorities employed medical workers from the Mainland and with the support of Beijing, a makeshift quarantine/treatment facility in Tsing Yi was constructed to allocate approximately 3,900 beds for emergency community isolation for individuals with mild or no symptoms.
5. In mid-February, Chinese President Xi Jinping made the rare call on Hong Kong officials to take “all necessary measures” against the pandemic. This has raised the concern of Hong Kong residents that a Mainland-style lockdown may be imminent. Many Hong Kong residents went on panic buying of necessities, resulting in empty shelves in supermarkets.
6. Hong Kong’s public transport operators have to reduce their services as many employees were infected by the coronavirus. Many professional drivers turned to serve the “anti-epidemic taxi” fleet for ferrying COVID-19 patients to clinics.
7. The central government intervened in mid-February 2022 to dispatch health specialists and medical material to the territory; additional assistance for constructed facilities modelled after those in Wuhan were speedily made operational within a

matter of weeks. The central government also dispatched epidemiologists, isolation facility construction workers and virus testers.

8. A mainland team of 38 meat processing specialists from Shanghai, Hangzhou, Shenzhen, Nanning and Xilingol League arrived in Hong Kong on 2 March 2022 to facilitate the supply of pork and beef to consumers after two major slaughterhouses were forced to close due to the COVID.

9. On 3 March 2022, a freight train from Shenzhen ferried anti-epidemic medical supplies, including 1.1 million COVID-19 virus test kits, 20,000 pieces of protective uniforms and other medical material for frontline anti-epidemic workers, in 18 containers; the train service will operate once daily with the possibility of ramping up the frequency in sync with the urgency of demand.

HONG KONG'S FIFTH WAVE OF COVID-19

LIM Tai Wei*

The Tsunami Arrives

- 1.1 Hong Kong has implemented the “zero-COVID” policy in sync with Beijing, a policy that had some successes in the past with the government acting speedily on rare outbreaks identified by contact tracing and imposing social distancing, movement restrictions, large-scale testing and quarantine measures. Due to the initial immense success of Hong Kong’s quarantine and tracing measures, vaccination rates lagged due to perception of the less urgency to do so. Vaccination rates amongst seniors have stayed at lower rates despite wide availability of vaccines since February 2021.¹

- 1.2 At the initial stage, the Hong Kong government relied on familiar measures to shut all schools, bars, gyms, salons, public areas, dining-in eateries (beyond 6 pm), public meetings, and imposed mask mandates and two-households private gatherings; these operating procedures that were successful in the past failed to contain the fifth wave.² The zero-COVID policy has also led to unusual measures. In mid-January 2022, the Hong Kong government had already taken the drastic step of culling more than 2,500 hamsters and other pets after detecting a COVID-19 infection in the animals of a pet shop. The move provoked social backlash within the territory and the world.³

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¹ Yeung, Jessie, “Hong Kong is sticking to zero-Covid, no matter what the cost” dated 17 February 2022 [downloaded on 17 February 2022], available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/16/china/hong-kong-covid-singapore-mic-intl-hnk/index.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

- 1.3 Health experts appear to be in consensus that the peak of Hong Kong's fifth wave is a result of the highly infectious omicron variant. Cases registered were more than those in 2020 and 2021 put together, with infections reaching more than 50,000 daily.⁴ On 9 March 2022, Liang Wannian, chief of the National Health Commission's COVID-19 task force, declared that the peak of the fifth wave was over when it fell to 20,000 to 30,000 daily cases.⁵ However, Chief Executive (CE) Carrie Lam warned that it was still too early to project the emerging trend of the fifth wave.⁶
- 1.4 This cautious attitude is useful given that Hong Kong is grappling with the fifth and most severe wave of COVID-19 pandemic infections. The government indicated they would return to contact tracing and compulsory testing after the peak.⁷ The measures were in place since late February 2022 when Carrie Lam revealed a universal testing programme for the whole 7.4 million population in March 2022, with three tests for each resident, starting on 26 March 2022 for nine days.⁸ The Hong Kong government has also disseminated FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) for individuals who were tested positive.⁹
- 1.5 The StayHomeSafe scheme which kickstarted from 8 February 2022 has the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) permitting some close and household contacts of

⁴ Walker, Tommy, "Confusion Over Possible Lockdown as Hong Kong Hits Record 56,000 COVID-19 Cases" dated 3 March 2022 VOA [downloaded on 3 March 2022], available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/6468746.html>.

⁵ HKFP Fast news, "Hong Kong's fifth Covid-19 wave has peaked, mainland epidemic expert Liang Wannian says" dated 11 March 2022 in HKFP Fast News [downloaded on 11 March 2022], available at <https://hongkongfp.com/2022/03/10/hong-kongs-fifth-covid-19-wave-has-peaked-mainland-epidemic-expert-liang-wannian-says/>.

⁶ The Standard, "No plan to relax harsh Covid-19 curbs, says Carrie Lam" dated 11 March 2022 in The Standard [downloaded on 11 March 2022], available at <https://www.thestandard.com.hk/breaking-news/section/4/188019/No-plan-to-relax-harsh-Covid-19-curbs,-says-Carrie-Lam>.

⁷ Ho, Kelly, "'Chaotic' policies, fear & overloaded hospitals: Why some Hongkongers are keeping their Covid infection from the gov't" dated 3 March 2022 [downloaded on 3 March 2022], available at <https://hongkongfp.com/2022/03/03/chaotic-policies-fear-overloaded-hospitals-why-some-hongkongers-are-keeping-their-covid-infection-from-the-govt/>.

⁸ Walker, Tommy, "Confusion Over Possible Lockdown as Hong Kong Hits Record 56,000 COVID-19 Cases".

⁹ Ho, Kelly, "'Chaotic' policies, fear & overloaded hospitals".

COVID-19 infected individuals to rely on home quarantine for two weeks.¹⁰ The StayHomeSafe scheme requires individuals who are exposed to infected individuals to carry out rapid tests regularly and if tested positive, they should contact a Home Affairs Department hotline quickly.¹¹

- 1.6 The authorities issued StayHomeSafe wristbands with Bluetooth positioning for tracking quarantined individuals; the government also relies on StayHomeSafe mobile app to track changes in environmental communication signals to confirm if quarantined individuals remain at home.¹² The CHP established a cyber platform (with more than 120,000 registrants) for COVID-19 patients to submit their test results; the authorities added: “[T]hey should take all necessary steps to avoid further spreading of the virus, including staying at home”.¹³

Support Needed for Hospitals

- 2.1 Before the fifth wave, Hong Kong’s earlier successes meant they had not experienced more than 200 new cases daily; thus, its existing procedures may be useful for managing a few dozen cases in each batch of infections but not on the magnitude of the fifth wave which quickly pushed the coping mechanism to the limit.¹⁴ By mid-February 2022, seven of 17 public hospitals hit inpatient bed capacities.¹⁵ As the fifth wave persisted, the zero COVID-19 policy further stretched the sustainability of this method as all positive cases were moved to hospitals regardless of severity.¹⁶ As a consequence, state hospitals were near full capacity¹⁷ as rapid infections filled hospital beds; in Hong Kong’s colder nights, for instance

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Yeung, Jessie, “Hong Kong is sticking to zero-Covid, no matter what the cost”.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Walker, Tommy, “Confusion Over Possible Lockdown as Hong Kong Hits Record 56,000 COVID-19 Cases”.

in the Caritas Medical Centre in Hong Kong, due to space constraints, elderly seniors had to wait patiently in queue, some on gurneys that lined up the carparks,¹⁸ while beds had been placed in outdoor spaces or in tents to free up indoor wards.¹⁹

2.2 Supply of oxygen for patients has also been strained by massive infections and larger numbers of critically sick individuals; medical professionals could be seen monitoring the cylinders (that are sometimes simply placed under the bed with no gauges to indicate oxygen volume) to ensure patients are not in danger of requiring resuscitation (due to cardiac arrests after depleting oxygen supply).²⁰ It came to a point when it was not possible to monitor every patient carefully or even feed them punctually, resulting in some senior patients requiring resuscitation after passing out due to low blood sugar levels out of starvation and were too drained to inform the staff.²¹

2.3 Some patients obtained oxygen from wall outlets connected to the hospitals' (e.g. Queen Elizabeth Hospital) centralised oxygen supply; however as the central supply which is meant for one person is now shared amongst 3-4 individuals, there are worries of contamination and infections and reduction in oxygen supply to each individual.²² Dr Larry Lee Lap-yip, chief manager of the Hospital Authority, articulated challenges to cylinders without gauges for indicating volume and the placing of other vital sign tracking devices on the ground without legged stands or desks because of space constraints.²³

¹⁸ Yeung, Jessie, "Hong Kong is sticking to zero-Covid, no matter what the cost" dated 17 Feb 2022 [downloaded on 17 Feb 2022], available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/16/china/hong-kong-covid-singapore-mic-intl-hnk/index.html>

¹⁹ Ho, Kelly, "'Chaotic' policies, fear & overloaded hospitals".

²⁰ Cheung, Elizabeth, "Coronavirus: Hong Kong medical workers share distressing scenes from overcrowded public hospitals as cases surge" dated 4 March 2022 in *South China Morning Post* [downloaded on 4 March 2022], available at https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3169154/coronavirus-hong-kong-medical-workers-share?module=perpetual_scroll_1&pgtype=article&campaign=3169154.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

- 2.4 Due to the large number of incoming patients, the constrained hospital space led to wanting hygiene levels (including complaints of human excrement smell), leading to distressed medical health workers and anxieties at not being able to dispense good quality care to patients; some even described the accident and emergency (A&E) at Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Jordan as “a battlefield”.²⁴ Patients lying on ambulance stretchers placed in every conceivable corners have led to another problem. Ambulance stretchers are for moving patients from the ambulance and do not belong to the Hospital Authority.²⁵ However, they were commandeered by the latter to substitute for beds.²⁶
- 2.5 It was difficult to maintain hygiene at these makeshift beds because of the need to change the large number of elderly patients wearing diapers and healthcare workers had to navigate through a disorderly arrangement of beds to reach them while the same congestion prevented cleaners from clearing the floor.²⁷ The increased infections required all hospital wards to administer swabs to single out all potential infections as not all wards are equipped with negative-pressure environments needed of specialised COVID-19 wards; only a plastic sheet isolates COVID-19 patients from non-infected individuals, raising fears of virus spread.²⁸
- 2.6 To mitigate manpower shortage, the Hong Kong authorities employed medical workers from the Mainland; Beijing also supported the local government with the construction of a makeshift quarantine/treatment facility in Tsing Yi to allocate approximately 3,900 beds for emergency community isolation for individuals with mild or no symptoms.²⁹ To complement these makeshift facilities in meeting overwhelming demand for hospital beds, the city paid Chinese construction companies to build even larger-capacity quarantine/treatment facilities with 50,000

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ho, Kelly, “‘Chaotic’ policies, fear & overloaded hospitals”.

beds.³⁰ Sun Hung Kai Properties has offered two Yuen Long and San Tin spaces to the Hong Kong SAR government for building isolation and treatment facilities hosting some 8,000 to 10,000 beds.³¹

- 2.7 Medics from hospitals like Queen Elizabeth Hospital noted that since 9 March 2022, there had been fewer patients remaining in the A&E ward as non-COVID-19 patients have been transferred to alternative wards.³² This is an indication of a gradual easing in the situation in hospitals.

To Lockdown or Not?

- 3.1 In mid-February, Chinese President Xi Jinping made the rare call on Hong Kong officials to take “all necessary measures” to fight the pandemic.³³ This was reported on the front pages of two Chinese state-owned media, raising worries amongst Hong Kong residents that a Mainland-style territory-wide lockdown was imminent.³⁴ Hong Kong media has the same speculation when the SAR government mandated mass testing for every resident from 17 March. *Sing Tao Daily*, Hong Kong’s most venerable Mandarin-language press, reported that mass testing will take place before a lockdown, though the Hong Kong CE Carrie Lam quelled speculations when she announced that there will not be a comprehensive lockdown.³⁵ China implemented strict and harsh lockdowns at the start of the pandemic to stem infection, resulting in deserted streets and bans on residents departing from their residences; the prospects of a possible lockdown have led to a mad rush for necessities in

³⁰ Walker, Tommy, “Confusion Over Possible Lockdown as Hong Kong Hits Record 56,000 COVID-19 Cases”.

³¹ *Xinhua*, “Hong Kong puts on united front against worst COVID-19 wave” dated 1 March 2022 in *Xinhua News Agency* [downloaded on 1 March 2022], available at <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/20220301/9ab3a218d58542ca80c8160292ae2423/c.html>.

³² Cheng, Selina, “Covid-19: Hong Kong Hospital Authority urges understanding as shocking photo emerges of bodies stored on ward” dated 11 March 2022 in Hong Kong Free Press (HKFP) [downloaded on 11 March 2022], available at <https://hongkongfp.com/2022/03/11/covid-19-hong-kong-hospital-authority-urges-understanding-as-shocking-photo-emerges-of-bodies-stored-on-ward/>.

³³ Yeung, Jessie, “Hong Kong is sticking to zero-Covid, no matter what the cost”.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Walker, Tommy, “Confusion Over Possible Lockdown as Hong Kong Hits Record 56,000 COVID-19 Cases”.

supermarkets. Dr Chui Tak-yi (Hong Kong's food and health secretary) tried to calm fears of shortages and advised against panic hoarding and buying.³⁶

- 3.2 The pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong party conducted a survey of 13,000 respondents.³⁷ Ninety per cent of the respondents embraced a city lockdown coordinated with a universal testing strategy and Ben Cowling (chair professor of epidemiology at the University of Hong Kong's School of Public Health) tweeted that a lockdown would save more lives than implementing it in the midst of mass testing.³⁸ Thus far, the Hong Kong government has avoided a lockdown as it is not practical to keep more than seven million people in their residences; however, Xi's call on officials had worried some about Hong Kong's adherence to the drastic zero-COVID strategy regardless of costs.³⁹

The Impact on Public Services

- 4.1 The fifth wave is beginning to make an impact on essential services. A housing estate infection cluster led the authorities to lock down several residential blocks involving thousands of residents. Garbage began to accumulate at the corridors while residents were unable to make a living.⁴⁰ Hong Kong's public transport operators were also compelled by circumstances to reduce their services as many employees were hit by COVID-19 in the persistent fifth wave. By 2 March 2022 for example, 1,300 MTR Corporation (MTRC) employees were infected (including those providing train services, maintenance and contractor work); when combined with the total number of employees highlighted as close contacts by the Centre for Health Protection and the potentially exposed individuals in the buildings under lockdown, the latest round of infections is "a tremendous challenge to rail

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Yeung, Jessie, "Hong Kong is sticking to zero-Covid, no matter what the cost".

⁴⁰ Ibid.

operations”.⁴¹ Due to the impact of the outbreak, MTRC cut down on its operations during morning and evening peak hours on the Tuen Ma Line and the Hong Kong Island Line while some customer service centres were shut because of staff shortage.⁴² One thousand staff of Hong Kong’s three major bus operators were also quarantined due to COVID-19 infections and bus operators like KMB dispensed rapid antigen test kits to its employees and requested all drivers and maintenance staff to go to work only after a negative result.⁴³

4.2 As daily infections climbed, professional drivers and cab drivers registered less business as people remained at home; this was aggravated by the strict policies prohibiting dining-in after 6pm. Many professional drivers turned to serve the “anti-epidemic taxi” fleet for ferrying COVID-19 patients to clinics.⁴⁴ Such drivers don masks, gloves and blue protective suits, arm themselves with disinfectants while keeping anti-epidemic supplies in the trunk of their vehicles and conduct rapid self-test kit for COVID-19 before setting off.⁴⁵

4.3 These “anti-epidemic taxis” are also used to serve staff members of medical facilities designated to treat COVID-19 patients. With the decrease in bus services and modified routes in the public transportation system,⁴⁶ these essential frontline medical staff personnel were led to special taxi service run by taxi groups that started a public service campaign to provide free rides to frontline medical personnel and ferrying of anti-epidemic material. These vehicles are easily recognisable as they have special markings.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Lee, Peter, “Covid-19: Hong Kong transportation providers face manpower shortage due to staff infection” dated 2 March 2022 in HKFP [downloaded on 2 March 2022], available at <https://hongkongfp.com/2022/03/02/covid-19-hong-kong-transportation-providers-face-manpower-shortage-due-to-staff-infection/>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ *Xinhua*, “Feature: Hong Kong taxi drivers join COVID-19 battle” dated 6 March 2022 [downloaded on 6 March 2022], available at <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/20220306/e8bc143fbc994469a9de0112c624468e/c.html>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Help from the Mainland

- 5.1 Before President Xi’s call on Hong Kong officials, the central government had intervened in mid-February 2022 to dispatch health specialists and medical supplies to the territory; additional assistance was rendered for constructing facilities modelled after those in Wuhan.⁴⁸ These facilities were speedily made operational within a matter of weeks.⁴⁹ The first batch of COVID-19 patients reached these community isolation facility (CIF) in Tsing Yi on 1 March 2022 at 7 pm.⁵⁰ The facility took in asymptomatic or mildly ill patients to isolate the infected so as to lessen the danger of infecting others and disconnect the chain of transmission within the community.⁵¹ The speed at which the Tsing Yi facility was built and made operational meant that they were completed in just seven days due to mainland resources and expertise.⁵²
- 5.2 The CIF (about 60,000 square metres in size) could house approximately 3,900 patients in modular cubicles, complete with furniture, beds, air conditioners, smoke detectors and fire extinguishers. Designed and constructed by China State Construction International Holdings Ltd, the company deployed 1,800 workers (including approximately 300 mainland employees and 1,500 Hong Kong workers who worked round the clock since 22 February 2022).⁵³ Chief Secretary for administration of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region John Lee opined that the Tsing Yi facility signified a combined mainland and Hong Kong resistance against the pandemic and remarked on the speed of its completion.⁵⁴ More sites for

⁴⁸ Yeung, Jessie, “Hong Kong is sticking to zero-Covid, no matter what the cost”.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ *Xinhua*, “Mainland-aided isolation facility in Hong Kong starts admitting COVID-19 patients” dated 1 March 2022 in *Xinhua* [downloaded on 1 March 2022], available at <https://english.news.cn/20220301/c6795e4c99074a9c9b739a21ecb680f3/c.html>.

⁵¹ *Xinhua*, “After 15-year “retirement,” freight train loaded with anti-epidemic supplies again arrives in Hong Kong” dated 3 March 2022 in *Xinhua* [downloaded on 3 March 2022], available at <https://english.news.cn/20220303/03f899c0e12e47ffae22a95551687ff2/c.html>.

⁵² *Xinhua*, “Mainland-aided isolation facility in Hong Kong starts admitting COVID-19 patients”.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

a total of five temporary and two permanent CIFs at Penny's Bay and Kai Tak Pier have been planned.⁵⁵

5.3 The central government also dispatched epidemiologists, isolation facility construction workers and virus testers to support the Hong Kong government.⁵⁶ Three teams of mainland health experts led by Liang Wannian, head of China's National Health Commission's COVID-19 response expert panel, had a dialogue with personnel from Hong Kong's Department of Health and the Hospital Authority of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region on 2 March 2022; they also visited the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health.⁵⁷ In the meeting, both sides had a detailed exchange on Hong Kong's COVID-19 updates, challenges faced and analysed related statistics. Director of Health of the Hong Kong SAR government Ronald Lam expressed gratitude to the central government for its broad and speedy support and to the teams for their visit, important advisory and strategising mitigation measures.⁵⁸

5.4 Another disruption was with the fresh meat supply. Ng Fung Hong, a leading food distributor and abattoir operator in Hong Kong, noted that the disruption of abattoir operations has affected fresh meat supply.⁵⁹ A mainland team of 38 meat processing specialists from Shanghai, Hangzhou, Shenzhen, Nanning and Xilingol League arrived in the SAR on 2 March 2022 to facilitate the supply of pork and beef to consumers after two major slaughterhouses were closed down on 25 February 2022.⁶⁰ The mainland specialists will be based in Hong Kong for two months in a closed loop.⁶¹ Meat processor and mainland delegation leader Zhou Guoming said:

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ *Xinhua*, "After 15-year "retirement," freight train loaded with anti-epidemic supplies again arrives in Hong Kong".

⁵⁷ *Xinhua*, "Mainland medical experts, Hong Kong health authorities exchange views on combating COVID-19" dated 3 March 2022 in Xinhuanet [downloaded on 3 March 2022], available at <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/20220303/34693786a379472c874c2c928fc7efe0/c.html>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ *Xinhua*, "After 15-year "retirement," freight train loaded with anti-epidemic supplies again arrives in Hong Kong".

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

“With my skills, I feel honoured to do something practical for the people of Hong Kong, so that they can take home fresh meat as soon as possible”.⁶²

5.5 On 28 February 2022, approximately 2,100 tonnes of fresh vegetables, or almost 90% of daily average vegetable supplies in 2021, were delivered from the Mainland to Hong Kong by land and sea from Dachanwan Wharf of Shenzhen port (at southern China’s Guangdong Province) after they were checked and cleared by mainland personnel.⁶³ Thanks to these efforts, on 28 February 2022, fresh food supply normalised and mainland chilled meat supply was kept up at approximately 1.4 times the daily typical volume.⁶⁴ On 3 March 2022, a freight train ferrying mainland supplies that signified the restart of mainland railway logistical supplies (15 years after the decades-old regular food supply service by rolling stock ceased due to improvements in highway deliveries) arrived.⁶⁵ It ferried anti-epidemic medical supplies such as 1.1 million COVID-19 virus test kits, 20,000 pieces of protective uniforms and other medical material in 18 containers from Shenzhen on a 35-minute journey for frontline anti-epidemic workers.⁶⁶ The train service will continue to operate once daily with the possibility of ramping up the frequency in sync with the urgency of demand.⁶⁷

5.6 Chinese enterprises pitched in to team up with local firms to combat the pandemic. Hong Kong’s industrial, commercial, cultural, real estate, social organisations and sectoral representatives declared their full support for pandemic measures instituted at a cross-sectoral gathering on 18 February 2022.⁶⁸ Local companies and mainland Chinese enterprises cleared hotels for quarantine use while some shopping centres and offices were converted into vaccination stations, and others provided land space

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ *Xinhua*, “Hong Kong puts on united front against worst COVID-19 wave”.

for isolation and medical facilities.⁶⁹ Mainland Chinese companies based in Hong Kong that are providing food and necessities to Hong Kong include China Resources Vanguard (Hong Kong) which supplies vegetables at cost while Sinopec (Hong Kong) established green channels with dozens of gas stations to service an anti-epidemic fleet of 300 taxis and other indented vehicles.⁷⁰

Hong Kong's Determination: The Endgame?

- 6.1 While Hong Kong depended on strict quarantines and tracing efforts to single out positive cases, the rest of the world started to relax restrictions. However, even these Hong Kong measures may not be enough to combat the fifth Omicron wave, nicknamed a “tsunami” by the island’s officials.⁷¹ To combat such massive waves, the Hong Kong authorities have welcomed mainland resources. In mid-February, Hong Kong CE Carrie Lam publicly embraced the central government’s support: “The problem we are facing is, given the magnitude, pace and severity of this fifth wave, it has outgrown our capacity. With the full support of the central (Chinese) government, the government’s united effort, and citizens’ full support, we have to fight against this wave of the virus. Surrendering to the virus is not an option”.⁷²
- 6.2 To explain her progress in early March 2022, Carrie Lam delivered a video speech to the 7.5 million residents and reassured them that the government is mobilising all manpower and resources from all departments against the pandemic: “At this critical time, all bureaus and departments, regardless of their purview, shall continue to work in concert to take up and undertake their assigned operations and tasks, bringing into full play the whole-of-government spirit to fight the epidemic”.⁷³ Under pressure from the central government, Hong Kong officials are shunning alternative options to implement the zero COVID-19 policy.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Yeung, Jessie, “Hong Kong is sticking to zero-Covid, no matter what the cost”.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ *Xinhua*, “Hong Kong puts on united front against worst COVID-19 wave”.

⁷⁴ Yeung, Jessie, “Hong Kong is sticking to zero-Covid, no matter what the cost”.

- 6.3 On this all-of-society approach, John Lee, chief secretary for administration of the Hong Kong SAR government, declared: “Now Hong Kong’s only enemy is the virus, and all sectors of Hong Kong are in full combat mode...The whole community is determined to win the war against the epidemic”.⁷⁵ Lam’s other senior staff members also stood behind her determined stance. Through his blogs, Secretary for the Civil Service of the Hong Kong SAR government Patrick Nip mobilised civil service teams to work with medical staff, chambers of commerce and the public to reach the goal of “dynamic zero infection”.⁷⁶
- 6.4 Non-Profit organisations (NPOs) are also playing a role. The Hong Kong Jockey Club set aside an additional HK\$100 million (about US\$12.8 million) to its anti-epidemic fund to help Hong Kong society manage the latest outbreak.⁷⁷ Joseph Chan, head of two Hong Kong social voluntary organisations (SVOs), was initially concerned if his team members would be intimidated by the outbreak but it turned out that the number of eager volunteers was more than the number of assignments.⁷⁸ The “18-District Anti-epidemic Team” (Hong Kong SAR’s 18 administrative divisions) drew 2,000 registered members operating in all districts, disseminating masks, hand sanitisers, rapid test kits and traditional Chinese medicines shortly after it was founded while more than 1,000 retirees from the uniformed groups were actively helping frontline counterparts in the fifth wave.⁷⁹
- 6.5 Given the mass mobilisation of resources in Hong Kong, generous support from the Mainland and the sheer determination of Hong Kong’s COVID-mitigation measures, it is expected that the SAR would be able to cope with a declining fifth wave. This may correlate with the situation in other Asia-Pacific areas like New Zealand, Singapore and Taiwan. In the case of New Zealand, its tight COVID-19 bubble was previously admired and the pre-Omicron schedule was to open up border controls

⁷⁵ *Xinhua*, “Hong Kong puts on united front against worst COVID-19 wave”.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

gradually until October 2022.⁸⁰ However, given that Omicron has proliferated nationwide, public sentiments, businesses and agricultural stakeholders now sway away from tight measures to favour speeding up reopening.⁸¹ One aspect that works for New Zealand is its high elderly vaccination rates which may mitigate its death rates in comparison with Hong Kong's (see Annex A).

6.6 Singapore's Ministry of Health (MOH) indicated that, given that the daily numbers of infections are declining and workload burdens for hospitals, primary care and COVID-19 treatment facilities are stabilising, the government will focus on safe travel resumption by simplifying testing procedures for Vaccinated Travel Lane (VTL) travellers.⁸² The eventual aim is to implement quarantine-free entry and re-entry to Singapore without the need for entry approval.⁸³ In the case of Taiwan, its Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung articulated on 8 March 2022 that Taiwan is unlikely to abolish the quarantine period required for arrivals before the end of 2022, pending the availability of new medicines eradicating COVID-19.⁸⁴ It has, however, shortened the quarantine period from 14 to 10 days on 7 March 2022 and then down to seven days after 7 April 2022, subject to situational monitoring.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Craymer, Lucy, "As Omicron surges, New Zealand's businesses want COVID bubble burst" dated 11 March 2022 in Reuters [downloaded on 11 March 2022], available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/omicron-surges-new-zealands-businesses-want-covid-bubble-burst-2022-03-10/>.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ministry of Health (MOH), "Resuming our Transition to Resilience" dated 11 March 2022 in MOH website [downloaded on 11 March 2022], available at <https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/resuming-our-transition-to-resilience>.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Focus Taiwan, "CORONAVIRUS/Taiwan unlikely to cancel quarantine entirely this year: Minister" dated 8 March 2022 in Focus Taiwan [downloaded on 8 March 2022], available at <https://focustaiwan.tw/society/202203080027>.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

ANNEX A

Cases are translating into deaths at much higher rates in Hong Kong than in New Zealand, where elderly vaccination rates are much higher

Daily **cases** per 100,000 people, and daily **deaths** per 2 million

