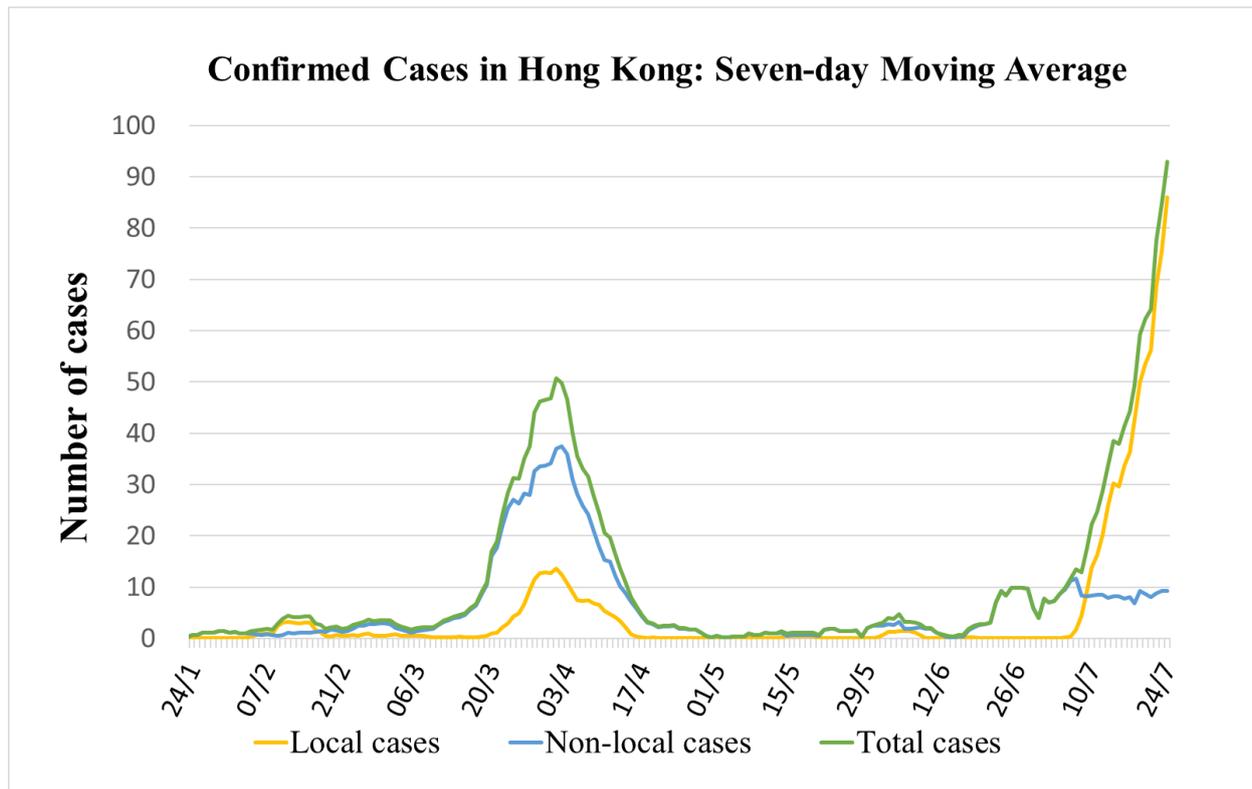


Fighting the Virus for Six Months Battling Another Wave of the Epidemic Together

Half a year has passed, but the global outbreak of COVID-19 has shown no signs of abating. Instead, the number of daily confirmed cases has been setting new records lately while the death toll has topped 600 000. Some cities are seeing a second or third wave of the epidemic, disrupting plans to relax restrictions and resume economic activities. Unfortunately, Hong Kong is also facing a similar situation. The number of new cases has been on the rise since early July, and for four days the daily figure has exceeded 100. The emergence of a large number of infection clusters in the community at the same time is deeply worrying and sounds an alarm for Hong Kong's anti-epidemic work. The Government has once again implemented stringent anti-epidemic measures and called on the public to heighten their vigilance and act together to suppress the epidemic as soon as possible.

How the epidemic has developed

Hong Kong's epidemic situation was kept firmly under control for almost two and a half months from mid-April to late June. Most confirmed cases were imported (the vast majority being Hong Kong residents returning from overseas), and there were only sporadic local cases concentrated in a few clusters. During this period, the Government gradually relaxed its social distancing measures under the "suppress and lift" strategy. Most business premises previously closed were reopened; people went to school and work as usual; public services generally returned to normal; and some 50 000 candidates completed this year's Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination. However, Hong Kong's epidemic situation has deteriorated rapidly since 5 July, with an upsurge in local confirmed cases involving a wide variety of settings and sectors. What's more, the sources of infection for over 40% of these cases remain unknown, significantly increasing the risk of virus transmission. We are on the verge of a large-scale community outbreak.

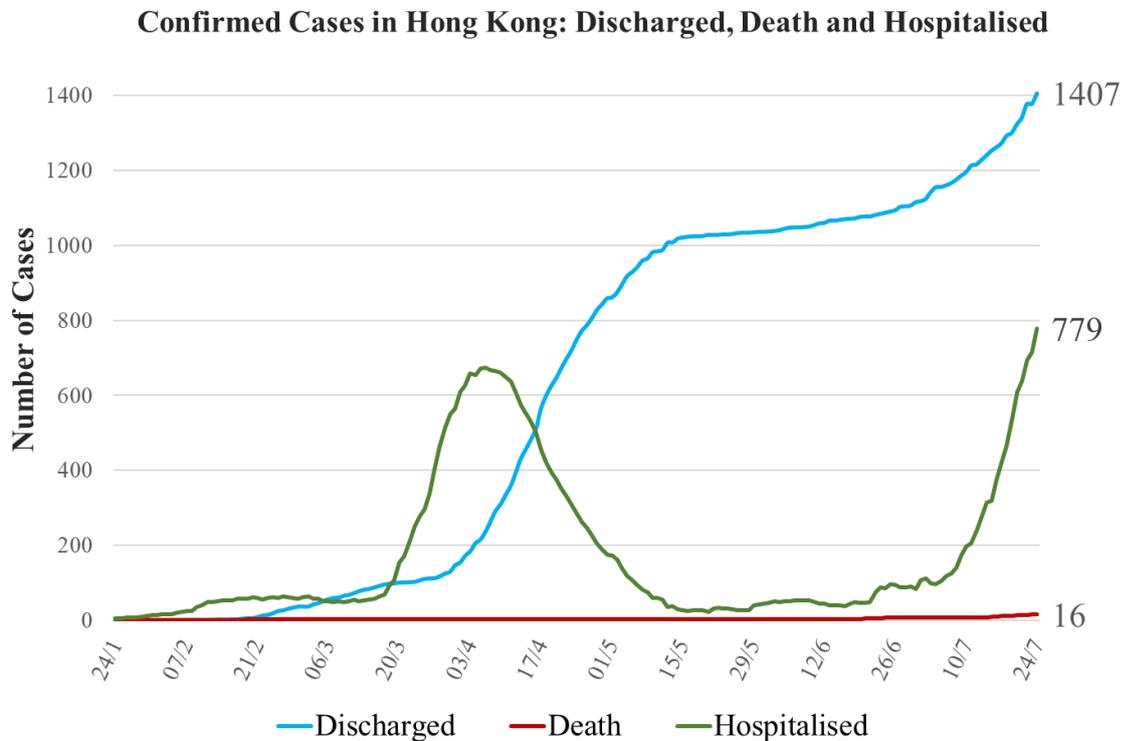


According to epidemiological investigations, 60% of the local cases can be categorised into a number of clusters, involving elderly care homes (appearing for the first time in Hong Kong), quite a number of restaurants, and residents of a public housing estate. Among confirmed cases are taxi drivers, restaurant staff and customers, hospital and clinic staff, elderly care home staff and residents, private medical practitioners, hospital patients, civil servants and students. The emergence of a large number of clusters at the same time, and the diverse background of confirmed cases, makes the work of tracing close contacts and cutting transmission chains very difficult.

Apart from an increase in the number of local confirmed cases, there has also been, unfortunately, a rise in the number of deaths as quite a number of patients are elderly or have chronic illnesses. In the past two weeks, nine more patients have passed away, bringing the Hong Kong epidemic death toll to 16. I would like to express my sincere condolences to the families, relatives and friends of the deceased.

Since the beginning of our fight against the epidemic, the experts have emphasised the need for us to guard against a collapse of our healthcare system due to large number of severe cases. At present, the

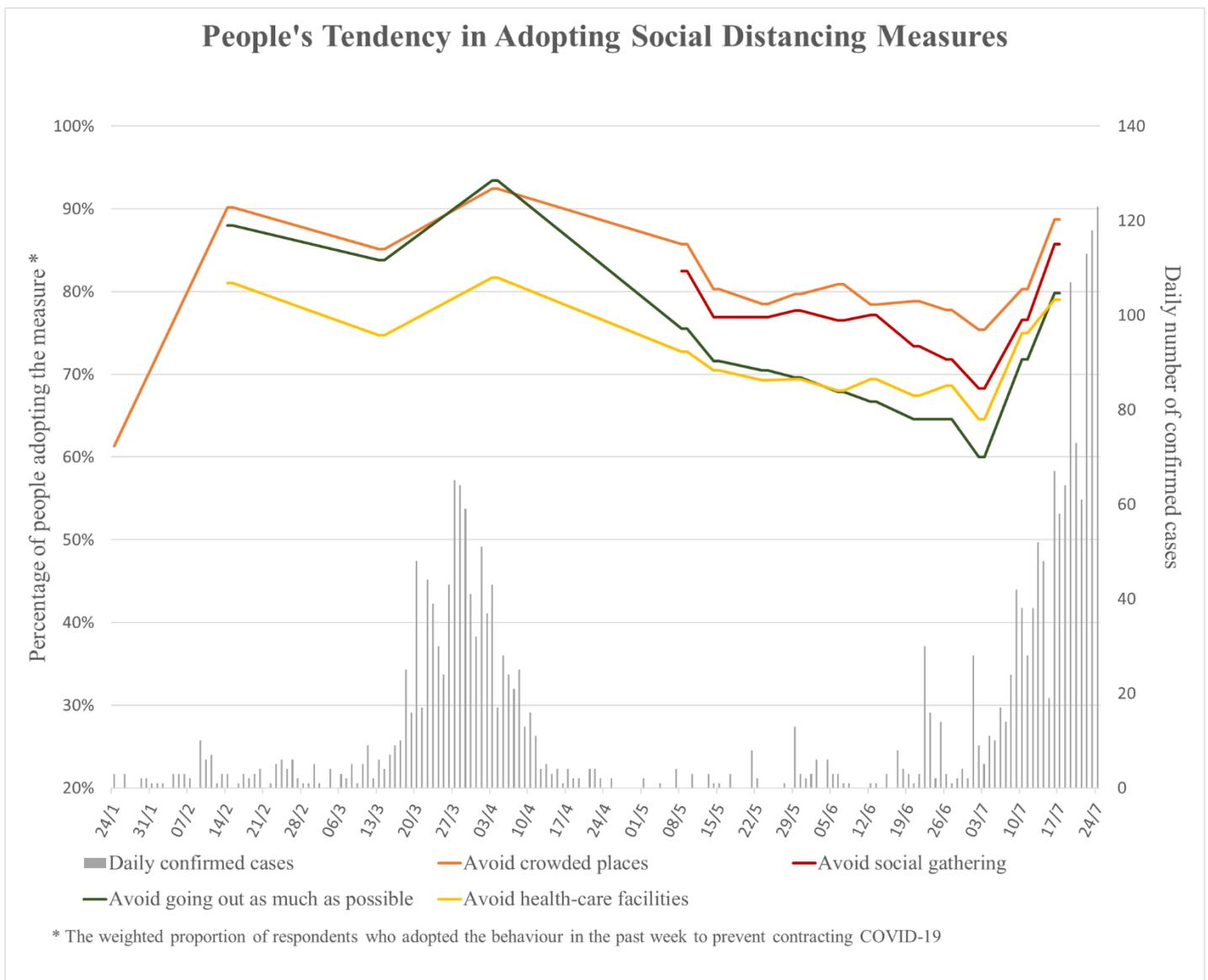
utilisation rate of negative pressure rooms and negative pressure beds of the various Hospital Authority (HA) hospitals is close to 80%, putting huge pressure on our frontline healthcare officers.



Likewise, colleagues of the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) and Public Health Laboratory Services Branch of the Department of Health (DH) are also facing immense pressure. Under the “test and trace” strategy, they are racing against time since the sooner we get the test results of suspected cases and trace their close contacts, the more likely we are able to cut the transmission chains. Many colleagues often work more than 10 hours a day and we can imagine how exhausted they must be. To cope with the increasing workload, we have engaged three testing institutions to take over the large-scale community testing for four relatively high-risk groups. I have requested the Police Force to make use of its “super computer”, or the Major Incident Investigation and Disaster Support System (MIIDSS), to help with contact tracing for confirmed cases. At present, more than 90 police officers and support staff are involved in the work of contact tracing, of which more than 30 police detectives are stationed at the CHP to work closely with DH personnel. They are supported by the police detectives in various police districts. They conduct in-depth follow-up investigations to identify the sources of infections and the close contacts of confirmed cases, so that

the CHP can follow up quickly to prevent the virus from spreading in the community.

The fight against the epidemic has lasted for several months. It is not only our anti-epidemic staff who feel exhausted; members of the public are also experiencing “anti-epidemic fatigue” to different extents and have become less alert. According to a survey by Professor Gabriel Leung, during the early period of the epidemic, people indeed went out less, avoided crowded places or healthcare facilities, and reduced social contacts. However, there was an obvious drop in the relevant behavioural indicators in May and June, which in turn increased the risk of community transmission of the virus.



Anti-epidemic efforts

Major measures implemented by the Government in response to developments over the past month are set out below:

Date	Event
30 June	The Government started delivering disposable masks produced under the Anti-epidemic Fund's Local Mask Production Subsidy Scheme for free to 2.8 million residential households in Hong Kong.
30 June	The Government announced the relaxation of a series of social distancing measures starting from 3 July.
7 July	The Government announced the latest measures in response to the emergence of a number of local confirmed cases with unknown sources of infection, including enhanced testing arrangement for inbound travellers and persons exempted from quarantine. Public hospitals also heightened vigilance and made isolation facilities ready.
9 July	The Government announced the tightening of social distancing measures, targeting activities where masks are not worn and covering catering premises, bars, clubs and nightclubs, fitness centres, party rooms, karaoke establishments, cinemas and places of public entertainment.
9 July	The Leisure and Cultural Services Department announced the temporary closure of some leisure facilities. Some leisure and cultural facilities would also adopt measures to limit visitor flow.
10 July	The Education Bureau announced the early commencement of summer holidays on 13 July for all secondary schools, primary schools and kindergartens.

13 July	<p>The Government announced a series of anti-epidemic measures to be implemented from mid-July, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● closing 12 types of business premises again and banning restaurant dine-in services at night for the first time; ● tightening the number of persons allowed in group gatherings in public places from 50 to four; ● introducing legislation requiring people on public transport carriers to wear a mask; ● providing free virus testing for four relatively high-risk groups, including staff of residential care homes for the elderly, residential care homes for the disabled as well as nursing homes; restaurant staff; taxi drivers; and property management staff.
18 July	<p>The Government announced that from 25 July, travellers who had been in seven high-risk places (i.e. Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines and South Africa) within 14 days before arrival in Hong Kong must provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test and a confirmed hotel reservation for the 14-day compulsory quarantine before boarding a flight to Hong Kong.</p>
19 July	<p>The Government announced another round of anti-epidemic measures, including the work-from-home arrangement for government employees, save for those providing emergency and essential public services, for one week from 20 July to 26 July (subsequently extended for another seven days to 2 August); introducing legislation to require people to wear a mask at all indoor public places; extending social distancing measures for restaurants and other premises; stepping up cleaning and disinfection in various districts; and increasing isolation and quarantine facilities.</p>
22 July	<p>The Government announced that from 23 July, people must wear a mask at indoor public places. In addition, the requirement to provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test and confirmed hotel booking before boarding a flight to Hong Kong would be extended to include the United States of America and Kazakhstan.</p>

The Government remains highly vigilant amid the rapidly worsening epidemic situation. In tackling the situation, we have not only enforced the most stringent measures since the epidemic started in January, but also rolled out even tougher measures. We are also carrying out the following work at full steam:

- (1) Enhancing testing capacity through public-private collaboration. Conducting more tests is conducive to “early identification, early isolation and early treatment” of the infected and reduces the risk of virus transmission in the community. To meet clinical and epidemiological needs, the CHP and the HA, with staff working around-the-clock, carried out an average of more than 10 000 tests per day over the past 10 days. They also procured services from private institutions where necessary. Meanwhile, we have made use of the Anti-epidemic Fund to engage three private institutions to conduct free testing for four relatively high-risk groups, including staff of residential care homes for the elderly, residential care homes for the disabled as well as nursing homes; restaurant staff; taxi drivers and frontline staff in the property management sector. They involve more than 400 000 people. According to our estimates, the current testing capacity of the private institutions in Hong Kong is not fewer than 20 000 tests per day (not including the potential increase by pooling samples). In order to do all the necessary tests, the relevant departments are proactively helping these institutions enhance their capacity. It is expected that 50 000 tests per day can be achieved by early August and more testing institutions may be established locally in parallel. In addition to the above-mentioned groups, I am concerned about the large number of cases in the public housing estates in Tsz Wan Shan and understand that the residents, especially the elderly, are worried. I have already asked the Home Affairs Department to co-ordinate free testing for residents in Tsz Ching Estate and the adjacent estates with a view to easing their minds. It would take time as the current demand for testing is huge, but the Government will do its best to address the concerns of residents.
- (2) Responding flexibly and increasing anti-epidemic facilities. To cope with the increase of hospitalised patients, the HA has taken

over Lei Yue Mun Park and Holiday Village, originally designated as quarantine centres, from the CHP to set up its first community isolation facility for patients with mild or no symptoms. The first group of 23 patients were admitted on 24 July, allowing the isolation beds in hospitals to handle more patients with more severe conditions. We have started retrofitting the exhibition halls at the AsiaWorld-Expo into a community isolation and treatment centre, which will also be used for receiving residents of elderly care homes in case they have to be quarantined in other places when other residents are infected. To make up for the inadequacy in quarantine facilities, we have recently formulated a plan to build an additional 2 000 units at Penny's Bay and will strive for their completion before the end of this year. By then, a total of 3 500 units will be available at Penny's Bay. It will become Hong Kong's largest designated quarantine centre and should be able to cope with another possible outbreak in winter. Besides, we have contacted more hotels to provide places for some of the Hong Kong residents returning from overseas who have negative test results to complete their 14-day compulsory quarantine there.

- (3) Planning ahead and devising further management and control measures. There are suggestions in the community that Hong Kong may consider such measures as a “stay-at-home order” or “lockdown” as has been adopted in other places if the situation further deteriorates. The impact of these “curfew-like” measures is far-reaching and should be handled very carefully. What we see now is that there is still room for further restricting the operation of various premises and reducing the number of people going out. We should take into account Hong Kong's actual situation and unless there is really no other choice, we will not adopt such extreme measures. I note that recently there have been a lot of false rumours on the internet saying that the Government will shortly implement “lockdown”. Some went as far as publishing fake news in the name of certain media organisations. Such malicious rumours have made our anti-epidemic efforts even more difficult and should be condemned.

Fighting the virus together with the support of the Central Government

The Central Government has been very concerned about Hong Kong's epidemic situation and supportive of the anti-epidemic work of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government. From arranging masks and other anti-epidemic supplies to be sent to Hong Kong and assisting Hong Kong residents stranded in Hubei and abroad to return to Hong Kong at the very beginning, to offering assistance to enhance our testing capability and retrofit the AsiaWorld-Expo into a "mobile cabin hospital" upon my recent request – all have shown the Central Government's care for Hong Kong people. But some people with ulterior motives have spread rumours, alleging that medical teams in the Mainland will provide clinical services in our public hospitals, DNA samples of Hong Kong people will be delivered to the Mainland, etc. It is outrageous that such people continue to take any opportunity to smear and damage the relationship between the Central Authorities and the HKSAR.

Over the past six months, the entire Hong Kong community has been fighting the virus together; healthcare workers have stayed committed to their duties; government departments have been making collaborative efforts; and various industries have shown their understanding and are ready to co-operate. All have contributed to Hong Kong's internationally recognised achievements in combating COVID-19. In the face of the current severe epidemic situation, we must keep up our spirit and make active responses, and have confidence that Hong Kong can get through the epidemic again. I appeal to everyone to endure all the inconveniences in life and strictly follow the social distancing measures in the immediate future. I would also like to appeal to landlords and employers again to ride out the difficult times with the community. The Government will spare no effort to provide the necessary support. If we stand united and work together, I am sure that we can overcome the difficult times and move forward again.

Mrs Carrie Lam
Chief Executive
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
25 July 2020