

For information

SARS Expert Committee

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndromes (SARS)

Crisis Management:

Inter-Departmental and Cross Bureau Logistics Support

BACKGROUND

By mid March 2003, it became apparent to the Government that there were signs of an outbreak of SARS cases occurring in the community. The daily number of additional SARS cases jumped from below 20 on 24 March to over 80 on 31 March 2003. In the residential estate Amoy Gardens alone, the number of SARS cases shot up from 7 cases on 25 March to a peak of over 60 cases on 27 March 2003. Meanwhile, the outbreak of SARS was spreading at an astonishing speed both regionally and globally.

2. In responding to the fast spread of the SARS disease in Hong Kong, the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food tasked the Permanent Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food Bureau to chair an Inter-departmental Action Co-ordinating Committee ("the Committee") to respond to emergency situations arising from the spread of SARS as well as to control the spread of the disease in the community.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND OPERATIONAL CONSTRAINTS

3. On an ad hoc basis, the Permanent Secretary secured the co-operation of the Police Force by seconding an Assistant Commissioner for Police to the Bureau to work on matters of an operational and security nature. She also formed an internal task force by re-deploying staff from the Health Division and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Division of the Bureau to serve as an executive arm of the Committee to assist her in mapping out new

strategies and drafting implementation plans. At the same time, she obtained the agreement of the Director of Administration to provide office accommodation for the task force as well as alternative office accommodation for contingency purposes.

4. The Committee consists of 4 policy/resource bureaux and more than 20 government departments and is aimed at co-ordinating territory-wide efforts to ensure the effective implementation of preventive, relief and response measures. The Committee is often required to complete its tasks at very short notice and receives no prior warning or notification of the size or the magnitude of the problem that requires attention.

5. For example, with very short notice the Committee was required to implement an isolation order for Block E of Amoy Gardens and later to effect its evacuation to an isolation center. Insufficient information was available to the Committee with regard to the number of households and the family size of the households to be evacuated. This problem was also compounded by the lack of protective clothing which needed to be resolved at the same time.

6. The Committee was also required to make available two housing blocks of Tin Yan Estate to serve as an isolation center within three days. This required considerable efforts in co-ordinating the various departments and the utility companies in providing the necessary services and furniture and fittings for the flats to be inhabitable for the evacuees within three days.

7. The planning and implementation of the relief operation for Hong Kong tourists stranded in Taipei commenced at around 2 pm and finished at around 12 midnight.

8. The Committee completed all these tasks and more on time and with a minimal of fuss. This was only made possible through strong leadership, a good team spirit from among the departments concerned, the foresight of team leaders in anticipating problems in the absence of full information, a disciplined and meticulous approach in planning and preparation despite a lack of time and efficient delivery of work orders that has been built up over the years.

PREVENTIVE, RELIEF AND RESPONSE MEASURES

9. Under the steer and co-ordination of the Committee, a series of measures have been implemented since late March to stop the export of SARS cases abroad, control the spread of the SARS disease in the community, prevent a massive outbreak of the SARS disease in any one geographic location or building and to mount rescue and relief operations. A chronological account of the different response measures initiated under the auspices of the Committee is set out at **Annex** for reference.

10. The roles and responsibilities of the Committee could be generalized as follows:

(i) Co-ordinate and steer emergency actions across bureaux and departments

11. There was a paramount need for the different bureaux and departments to take prompt and concerted actions to contribute towards the common objective of controlling the spread of SARS. The Committee played a pivotal role in assigning clear responsibilities and providing policy steer for departments to carry out these emergency actions. The Committee also kept an overall command to ensure the smooth implementation of actions by issuing operational orders and close monitoring. For example, during the period between 27 March to 22 May, the Committee co-ordinated the efforts of different Bureaux and departments in implementing the following key measures and actions:-

- (a) Port Health Declarations and body temperature taking at Ports and Airport and border crossing points that required a high level of support and co-operation from the Port Health Authority, Airport Authority, Immigration Department, Security Bureau, Government Supplies Department (for the procurement of equipment), Auxiliary Medical Service, Civil Aid Service, Electrical and Mechanical Services Department, and Marine Department.
- (b) The designation of four Dedicated Medical Centres for the monitoring of the health conditions of the close contacts of SARS patients.

- (c) The provision of Isolation Centres for accommodating the residents of Amoy Gardens, the massive evacuation of the Block E residents of Amoy Gardens and the subsequent disinfection and cleansing of all the household units of Block E, involving the Police, the Home Affairs Department, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (for the provision of holiday camps to serve as Isolation Centres), the Department of Justice, the Department of Health, the Agricultural, Fisheries and Conservation Department, the Social Welfare Department, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, Government Land Transport Agency, Civil Aid Service as well as other departments.
- (d) The preparation and execution of a contingency plan to secure the Tin Yan Estate managed by the Housing Department with a capacity of about 4,000 people as an Isolation Centre in the event of a massive evacuation of residents from SARS affected housing estates. The Tin Yan Estate was subsequently used to accommodate health care workers.
- (e) The implementation of a mandatory Home Confinement Scheme for all the household contacts of SARS patients.

(ii) Take proactive investigative and remedial actions

12. The Committee set up a Multi-disciplinary Response Team to make use of the information technology system (the Major Incident Investigation and Disaster Support System) developed by the Police to analyse the daily patient data from hospitals and map out the daily proactive strategy for departments to investigate the potential cluster of SARS cases and take remedial actions as necessary to rectify any adverse environmental factors that may become a transmission mode for the spread of the disease, e.g. sewage defects, pest infestation. The Committee also made use of other modern technology and equipment to improve the cost-effectiveness of the various containment measures.

(iii) Collate and disseminate Information

13. The Committee served another function of collating facts and figures about the overall SARS outbreak or individual control measure against SARS

for reference by members of the public, the local Consular Corps and the international community. The information was disseminated in the form of information bulletins on SARS, press releases, different kinds of daily situation reports, on-line information platform for progress on proactive actions, briefings for foreign Chambers of Commerce and Consul-Generals, etc.

(iv) Conduct risk assessment

14. The Committee provided a useful forum for the Department of Health and other member departments to share perspectives of the risk factors of different moving trends in the SARS outbreak and facilitate the appropriate decision-making. For example, measures were put in place to advise the foreign domestic helpers to avoid congregating in public places on public holidays to reduce the risk of cross contamination in crowds. Detailed operational procedures were also set out for the Police and Immigration Department to intercept the home confinement defaulters to reduce the risk of allowing potential SARS carriers to spread the disease to the local community, Mainland or overseas communities.

(iv) Provide response measures in dealing with all other SARS related emergencies

15. The Committee also acted as a Co-ordination Centre in providing immediate response to unexpected emergency situations in relation to the SARS outbreak. The Committee was able to garner the appropriate expertise/support and adequate manpower inside and outside of the Government to prepare for the relief operation for the stranded Hong Kong tourist group from Taiwan and the rescue operation for the entry of a Malaysian freighter in which crew members were suspected to have contracted SARS.

WAY FORWARD

16. The SARS outbreak provided an invaluable experience for the bureaux and departments to appreciate the importance of co-ordinated and timely emergency response in dealing with outbreaks of infectious diseases. The learning points from the work of the Committee would be collected and fine-tuned for the compilation of an operational contingency plan in dealing

with similar outbreaks in future, if any.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
June 2003

**Inter-departmental Action Co-ordinating Committee
Chronological Account of Response Measures**

Date(s)	Measures
27 March 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Director of Health amended the Quarantine and Prevention of Disease Ordinance through Gazette to allow the Director to apply all existing relevant legal power to persons or situations associated with SARS.
28 March 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Labour Department appealed to employers to be sympathetic and grant sick/paid leave to employees infected with SARS disease or being close contacts of infected persons (including the foreign domestic helpers).● Labour Department arranged radio broadcasts to convey health message to foreign domestic helpers in their native languages to reduce their congregation in public places and minimize the risk of disease transmission.● Four medical clinics of the Department of Health were dedicated for close contacts of confirmed SARS patients to report on daily basis for 10 days for purpose of medical surveillance.
29 March 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Department of Health and Immigration Department with assistance of Airport Authority, all major transport operators, Civil Aid Service and Auxiliary Medical Service imposed requirements of health declarations on all arriving travelers into Hong Kong by air, land or sea.● Department of Health started issuing certification

	<p>for persons being close contacts of SARS patients to encourage them to report their status to the employers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Transport Department and Marine Department advised transport operators to cleanse and disinfect their vehicles and vessels properly.
30 March 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Department of Health exercised legal power to isolate Block E of Amoy Gardens where close to 90 residents were found infected with SARS at that time. More than 10 government departments were mobilized to provide different types of support services.
1 - 10 April 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Department of Health exercised legal power to evacuate residents from Block E, Amoy Gardens to be confined in three government-run holiday camps for 10 days of medical surveillance. In the meantime, actions were taken to investigate the environmental conditions in the Block and also disinfect the individual flats and common areas of the Block. More than 10 government departments were mobilized to provide different types of support services for the evacuation, camp confinement and discharge of the residents. ● Housing Department and Government Supplies Department started contingency preparation for the furnishing of additional isolation facilities at an interim housing estate, Tin Yan Estate, in case large number of residents would have to be evacuated from other blocks of Amoy Gardens or other places where outbreak of SARS was identified.
10 April 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Department of Health exercised legal power to issue the first batch of confinement orders to the household contacts of confirmed SARS patients for mandatory home confinement for 10 days.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A Central Co-ordination Centre was set up to monitor the operational flow of the home confinement arrangements and disseminate relevant facts and figures. ● Home Affairs Department and Social Welfare Department set up enquiry hotlines and provided support services for parties subject to home confinement. Police also deployed manpower to enforce the compliance of the home confinement orders.
11 April 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Isolation camp facilities were reserved for home confinees who requested to observe confinement on camps.
16 April 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Amendments were made to the Prevention of the Spread of Infectious Diseases Regulations to restrict specified persons from leaving Hong Kong, and measure body temperature and conduct medical examination of any person arriving in or departing Hong Kong for purpose of controlling the spread of SARS. ● After the legal amendments, Police and Immigration Department were authorized to stop, detain and remove home confinement defaulters on streets or at immigration control points.
17 April 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● All out-bound air passengers were required to have their body temperature taken before departure. ● To further prevent the risk of outbreak in any one geographic location in the community, the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau set up a Multi-disciplinary Response Team to support the Department of Health and line up a number of departments including Food and Environmental

	<p>Hygiene Department, Housing Department, Buildings Department, Drainage Services Department, Environmental Protection Department and Electrical and Mechanical Services Department to take proactive investigative and remedial actions whenever the Police's Major Incident Investigation and Disaster Support System identified a potential cluster of SARS cases from the daily SARS patient data transmitted electronically from the eSARS system of the Hospital Authority.</p>
22 April 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Department of Health and Food and Environmental Hygiene Department started disinfecting the household units of all confirmed SARS cases.
24 April 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● All air transit and inbound passengers were required to have body temperature taken. ● All arriving passengers via Lo Wu and Hung Hom were required to have body temperature taken. Other arriving passengers via other land control points were sampled to have body temperature taken.
25 April 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Department of Health extended home confinement arrangements to household contacts of suspected SARS cases. ● The first batch of accommodation at Tin Yan Estate was made available for the medical doctors and nurses of the Hospital Authority for segregation from their family members.
26 April 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● All passengers arriving by sea were required to have their body temperature taken at the time of arrival in Hong Kong.
29 April 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Government arranged a chartered flight to escort a group of Hong Kong tourists, who were

	<p>detained by the Taiwanese authority in Taipei after a member of the group was found to have fever. A number of disciplinary departments and the Information Services Department were mobilized to support Department of Health in receiving the tour group.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● All members of the tour group were immediately sent home for mandatory confinement after arrival. The confinement orders were shortly lifted as the member of the group was subsequently confirmed to be free from SARS.
1 May 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● All inbound air passengers were checked by infrared fever screening machines.
4 May 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Marine Department received calls for assistance from a Malaysian-registered cargo ship on its way to Huangpu in Guangdong from Thailand. The shipmaster sought HKSARG's assistance because 10 of its 24 crew members had fallen ill with symptoms of fever, cough and aching joints. ● The Inter-departmental Action Co-ordinating Committee mounted a rescue operation with a number of government departments including Department of Health, Marine Department, the Police, Fire Services Department, Government Flying Services, Immigration Department, Information Services Department.
7 May 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Permanent Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food conducted briefing for Consul-Generals in Hong Kong on the temperature taking measures at all immigration control points.

20 May 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="483 208 1335 461">● Health, Welfare and Food Bureau commenced a review exercise of the operational performance of the Inter-departmental Action Co-ordinating Committee and the Government's state of preparedness in dealing with emergency situations.
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