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Re: Anti-epidemic Travel Regime

Dear Chief Executive,

We would like to follow up on the previous letter that we sent you on March 14th, 2022. Since then, the situation around the travel regime in Hong Kong has got worse. While we acknowledge that the announcements on April 22nd to relax travel restrictions are a step in the right direction, serious concerns remain among the international business community in Hong Kong.

The number of travellers that struggle to return to Hong Kong is increasing because of the continuous cancellation of flights. A major reason (next to hotel quarantine, crew testing and operational challenges¹) is the current route-specific suspension mechanism, which is highly disruptive for the business community in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, while the number of infected cases in Hong Kong is

¹ A comprehensive overview of the operational challenges for airlines was provided in the letter of the European Travel and Tourism Council, dated March 23rd 2022.



going down and the pandemic situation has been stabilizing, many of the measures that isolate Hong Kong remain.

Let us give you some examples:

- The constant cancellation of flights because of the circuit breaker mechanism has become a nightmare for anyone wanting to leave or arrive to Hong Kong. Almost daily, our members and other residents have been reporting that they are unable to find their way back to Hong Kong or see their business travel being cancelled. Many of us are giving up. Scaling back the flight suspension threshold from three to five or 5% of the total number of passengers is unlikely to significantly improve the connectivity & accessibility of our city – seriously undermining the status of Hong Kong as an international business centre. Many European carriers that had significant operations in HK are waiting for the circuit breaker mechanisms to be lifted before resuming operations to HK.
- The arriving passengers from overseas are asked to take a PCR test before the departure. The Cycle threshold level (CT Value) is higher at Hong Kong airport than in most of the other countries. This difference means that many people that tested negative in the origin end being tested positive on arrival. This procedure has and still is creating unnecessary pain to people arriving to Hong Kong, consuming resources and more importantly making people to think twice if they really have to come to Hong Kong, contributing to the perception that Hong Kong is isolating from the rest of the world and eroding the image of Hong Kong abroad.
- Even within Hong Kong the threshold value is at 30/33 compared to 45 at the airport, which creates an impression that the value of 45 is arbitrary. We suggest that arriving passengers are treated in the same way as local residents who tested positive and are asymptomatic or mild cases and are allowed to isolate at home if circumstances allow.
- Many countries around the world, including those in the region such as Singapore, have removed all requirements of on arrival tests for vaccinated passengers. This also implies that many testing labs that issue certification are closing around the world, making it harder for travellers to provide PCR test with certificate. We suggest that in addition to the pre-departure PCR requirements, HK would allow the possibility to conduct a pre-departure RAT test supervised by a certified practitioner or a clinic.
- Moreover, many countries stopped requesting a PCR test on arrival if the traveller is fully vaccinated and has had COVID 19 in the 60 days prior to travelling, since the PCR test can still test positive for that period of time, although the traveller will not represent a risk. Countries following the above protocol include Australia.



- At the moment, incoming arrivals to HK are required to spend at least 7 days in hotel quarantine. As the residents who test positive but have mild or no symptoms are able to self-isolate at home, and as a significant fraction of HK population is likely to have reached herd immunity, it is difficult to find a reason why incoming travellers who test negative are considered a higher risk. Considering the very limited risks to safety and health, we ask to allow returning Hong Kong residents to self-monitor at home for 4 days, which is an average incubation period for the current Omicron variant and continue testing up to 7 days.
- Finally, we want to bring to your attention that with the increase of flight cancellations we are collecting an increasingly and worrying number of complains as the hotels are not reimbursing or accepting changes due to those cancellations.

Those of us that have had the chance to travel abroad in the last months had a very similar experience and share similar comments. There is life beyond Covid. You can travel around the world, you can visit your families, you can travel for business. Countries are doing their best to make it safe, and Hong Kong can leverage on this positive experience of other countries in the region like Singapore and adopt the best practices. We all need to work together to overcome the unnecessary fear that Hong Kong has associated to travelling in the last years.

Our colleagues from the Australian Chamber sent you recently a letter calling for the lifting of the circuit breaking mechanism. **We would like to support this letter and request also (a) the cancellation of the route-specific suspension mechanism and (b) the immediate lifting of all quarantine measures on arrival to Hong Kong and (c) eagerly awaiting the updates to the crew conditions** - to end the current discriminatory practice and reduce the cycle testing level (CT Value) to match the same used inside Hong Kong as well as requesting RAT tests instead of PCR tests for all travellers before arriving to Hong Kong.

We believe that introducing those changes – while not impacting the health risks for the population in Hong Kong - would mean a HUGE improvement not only for the international business community but for everyone in Hong Kong. EuroCham believes the announcements regarding travel restrictions made on April 22nd are a useful first step towards reopening and we encourage you to implement further relaxations.



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Furthermore, the timing for additional relaxation is opportune, considering the citizens aiming to return to Hong Kong and the opening for non-residents. This might even have a positive impact on the economic challenges our city is currently dealing with. EuroCham is committed in our support to improve the economic situation in Hong Kong.

Looking forward to your response and we are available at any moment to discuss the issues addressed in this letter with you and the Hong Kong Government and Administration.

Frederik Gollob

Chairman

The European Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong