

CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

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COVID CONTROLS RELAXED FOR LOCAL AIRCREW

Easing of curbs comes with strict conditions for overseas layovers, with airlines told to ensure compliance and penalise staff who flout rules

Ng Kang-chung, Oscar Liu and Harvey Kong

Hong Kong yesterday started allowing local aircrew to skip hotel quarantine overseas, but the latest easing of coronavirus curbs came with strict layover conditions and a warning that airlines must ensure compliance.

Aircrew on layovers would no longer have to be confined to their hotel rooms, but "must avoid mask-off activities save for eating and drinking and refrain from mass gatherings and going to crowded places such as bars"; the government said in a statement. "For an aircrew who fails to comply with the requirements, the eligibility of its designated quarantine arrangements will be revoked."

The revisions apply to all locally based aircrew performing flight duties to and from overseas places or Taiwan, and authorities told airlines to impose penalties on any staff member who flouted the rules.

The changes were welcomed by the city's flagship carrier, Cathay Pacific, which said it would continue to add back more flights "as quickly as is feasible".

"These adjustments are positive developments for our pilots and cabin crew, who have endured stringent Covid-19-related operating constraints over the past 2½ years," a spokesman said.

Hong Kong Airlines also said the end to the quarantine requirement would help "enhance manpower efficiency".

The relaxation followed the launch of the government's "0+3" entry scheme last week, which scrapped the mandatory hotel quarantine period for inbound travellers in favour of three days of medical surveillance.

Over the past two weeks, the number of daily coronavirus cases in Hong Kong has fallen steadily and has remained below the 4,000 mark for the past three days. Health authorities yesterday logged 3,286 infections, 272 of which were imported, and eight more deaths.

Aircrew would still need to conduct a pre-departure rapid antigen test and further screenings during the first three days of their arrival.

Those returning from any location aside from the mainland must also undergo three days of medical surveillance, but unlike other residents, their movements will not be limited by the amber QR code.

Residents with an amber status can go to work or school but are prohibited from entering any premises covered by the city's vaccine pass scheme, such as bars and restaurants.

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CATHAY PACIFIC SPOKESMAN

Ng Kam-hung, an assistant professor at the department of aeronautical and aviation engineering at Polytechnic University, agreed the changes would take some staffing pressure off the airlines, which in turn would contribute to reviving the tourism sector.

"With the relaxed restrictions, airlines can be more flexible in working out rosters for aircrew. During the peak of the Covid-19 outbreak, aircrews had to be isolated in hotels for days and they could not be deployed to fly," he said. "It certainly increased the costs to airlines because they had to find more people to work if they were to keep the passengers flying."

Hong Kong Airlines also welcomed the relaxation of the

quarantine requirements, saying this would help "enhance manpower efficiency".

The Cathay Pacific Airways Flight Attendants Union applauded the move as a sign that things "were slowly getting back to normal", said vice-chairwoman Grace Siu Wing-yan, adding ideally the government would drop its rule that aircrew must wait for their polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test results at the airport. "This process can take at least two to three hours, which can be a very tough experience for crew members who have just finished a long-haul flight," Siu said.

But a Cathay employee, who asked not to be named, said the revised arrangements had been adopted too late and the new testing requirements for aircrew were unreasonable.

"I don't understand why we need to do PCR tests four days in a row. That's way more than those inbound travellers who are on board with us on the same flight," the employee said.

The staff member also said the requirement to wait for PCR test results at the airport if cabin crew had recently done an overseas layover could leave them stuck there for several hours.

"Take me as an example. I will have a long-haul flight to Melbourne next week with an overlay. That means I need to wait at least two hours for the PCR negative test result when I come back to Hong Kong under the 'test-and-hold' arrangement," the airline employee said. "But if I have another turnover flight two days later, I will not be eligible to undergo the 'test-and-go' arrangement because I had an overlay on my previous trip within the seven-day window."

"Imagine the turnover flight is between Hong Kong and India from 7am to 10pm. That's no joke if crew members need to wait for two more hours for the negative test result."

Separately, respiratory medicine expert Dr Leung Chi-chiu said the recent downward trend in daily Covid-19 infections presented a "golden opportunity" to quickly relax the city's social-distancing measures.

Hong Kong's overall Covid-19 tally stands at 1,779,695 cases and 10,184 related fatalities.

> RELAX MEALTIME RULES A3

Festival hotspots



Despite the sweltering conditions, Cheung Chau Island (above) is packed with visitors as Hong Kong experiences the hottest Chung Yeung Festival on record yesterday. Elsewhere, some families decided to pay tribute to their ancestors by sweeping their

graves at Diamond Hill Cemetery, while hundreds of people ignored social-distancing rules to flock to Shek O Beach to enjoy a swim or relax in the shade, as temperatures soared. Photos: Yik Yeung-man, Dickson Lee, Xiaomei Chen > FULL REPORT A5



CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS

Poll reveals 'crisis of confidence' of Taiwan firms on mainland

Over half have already relocated some operations or are considering move

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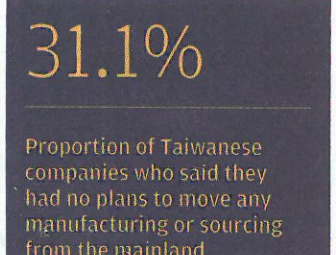
More than a quarter of Taiwanese companies with business in mainland China have already relocated some production or sourcing elsewhere, and a further third are considering doing so, according to findings by a US-based think tank amid growing tensions across the strait.

Only 31.1 per cent of Taiwanese firms said they had no plans to move any manufacturing or

respondents preferred moving some of their business back to Taiwan, 19.5 per cent pointed to northeast Asia, and 10.3 per cent selected South or Central Asia, or about the same percentage as those favouring North America.

The survey aimed to address "gaps" in understanding the views that Taiwanese executives have in regard to mainland China, according to its author, Scott Kennedy, who is a senior adviser and trustee chair in Chinese business and economics at the CSIS. He said the results reflected "a

crisis of confidence" in mainland demand being met from within its borders. While Beijing's zero-Covid policy was a factor in driving away businesses, Taiwanese firms' decisions appeared to be affected by their perspectives on Taiwan's economy, the island's economic linkages, cross-strait politics and security concerns - particularly the prospects of a US-China military confrontation, CSIS said.



Taiwanese companies were moving operations away from Taiwan, but in smaller numbers. A total of 53.1 per cent of respondents were in the services sector, 43.2 per cent were from industrial firms, and the rest were in agriculture.

Some 13 per cent said they had already moved some operations out of Taiwan, and 20.8 per cent were considering doing so. Of those who had moved, 67.8 per cent chose Southeast Asia, 29.4 per cent opted for Japan and South Korea, and 14.1 per cent moved to South and Central Asia.

However, 20.9 per cent of firms that had moved or were considering moving some opera-

mainland demand was being met from within its borders.

Nearly a quarter of the surveyed firms said they were in favour of Taiwan's independence from mainland China, 69.1 per cent preferred the status quo, and 6.1 per cent said they supported unification with the mainland.

"The survey's results are not proof that Taiwan wants to fully decouple from China or be part of a project to heavily isolate China from the global economy," the CSIS said. And based on the findings, the US should consider pressing Beijing to improve its

with mainland China because of Taiwan's leading strengths in semiconductor manufacturing".

Although the mainland is Taiwan's largest trading partner and greatest recipient of Taiwan's cumulative investment over the past three decades, the mainland was deemed a less important "economic partner" than countries such as the US and Japan.

"The survey's results are not proof that Taiwan wants to fully decouple from China or be part of a project to heavily isolate China from the global economy," the CSIS said. And based on the findings, the US should consider pressing Beijing to improve its