

Are spiking community cases going to deflate Singapore-Hong Kong air travel bubble?

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IS the keenly-awaited Singapore-Hong Kong air travel bubble at risk of bursting, now that the Singapore has reported a spike in covid community cases?

The relaunch of the quarantine-free travel arrangement between the two Asian aviation hubs was announced only on Monday – and with cautious optimism – but since then Singapore has reported 16 community cases on Thursday, and six between Monday and Wednesday.

This has prompted some to wonder if Singapore would deflate the fragile bubble this time. The air travel bubble was shelved at the last minute last November due to rising cases in Hong Kong.

Joshua Ng, a director at Alton Aviation Consultancy (Singapore), thinks it is premature to conclude that the air travel bubble is at risk, given the evolving situation as more evidence has to be brought to light to give cause for concern.

He noted that a pre-condition of the quarantine-free arrangement is that the seven-day average must be five or fewer unlinked community cases in either Singapore or Hong Kong. The recent community cases are all linked to prior cases, and hence would not be included in the unlinked community case counts.

Unlinked community cases in Singapore stood at seven in the past week, up from five in the week before, according to the Ministry of Health.

Michael Alexander Kruesi, an assistant professor who teaches in the Singapore Institute of Technology's hospitality business programme,

thinks the recent and unexpected outbreak in Singapore has a major impact on the proposed travel bubble.

Prof Kruesi said both Singapore and Hong Kong residents have enjoyed relative freedoms in recent months, as the pandemic is largely under control.

"The question that presents itself, is if this travel bubble is worth jeopardising these freedoms. The percentage of the population that will be able to travel (to see loved ones or even for leisure) is very low, specifically, it is limited to 200 passengers per day."

He noted the benefits of gradual reopening of the borders, including as a measure of restoring confidence in the possibility of a renaissance of the tourism industry. But he cautioned that rushing into an arrangement that looks promising for some in the short term may have long term consequences that could threaten a more controlled and well-planned course of action.

He advises both governments to reconsider if the desirability of this arrangement is worth the possible risk, and urges them to delay the bubble further.

Transport Minister Ong Ye Kung had said at Monday's announcement that the bubble would take off on May 26 – if the situations in both cities remain stable by then.

In Hong Kong, a total of 15 cases were reported on Thursday, all imported. It did not provide the seven-day average, but there were 15 local cases from unknown sources in the past fortnight.

It started to relax measures on Thursday, allowing bars and pubs, bathhouses, party rooms, clubs or nightclubs and karaoke establishments to reopen until 1.59am every day if all staff and customers have received their first dose of the vaccine.