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### Switzerland in the local press

**Art Basel Hong Kong called off over coronavirus fears (SCMP, Feb. 7):** Switzerland's MCH Group AG said it had no choice but to scrap Art Basel Hong Kong planned for March 17-21 due to concerns over the safety of participants, "severe" logistical challenges and escalating difficulties in international travel. The Art Basel franchise, which counts UBS Group AG as its lead partner, also has fairs in Miami and Basel, Switzerland. The Hong Kong event would have been the eighth edition of one of Asia's most prestigious art fairs. Last year, it drew some 88,000 people, including visitors from mainland China.

### Foreign Policy/International Relations

**US assails Beijing over sentencing of Hong Kong bookseller Gui Minhai (SCMP, Feb. 28):** The United States condemned China's sentencing of Gui Minhai, the Hong Kong bookseller and publisher accused by Chinese authorities of providing intelligence to foreign entities. Gui, a Swedish national, was one of a number of Hong Kong-based booksellers who disappeared in 2015. Criticising the punishment in a statement, the US State Department called on China "to release him immediately and unconditionally". A European Union spokeswoman said there were "serious questions to be answered about this case" and vowed that the EU would continue to raise Gui's case with Beijing.

**Hong Kong bans travellers from South Korea amid growing coronavirus outbreak (SCMP, Feb. 25):** Travellers from South Korea who are not Hong Kong residents will be banned from entering the city from Feb. 25, while the Security Bureau has warned Hongkongers to avoid the destination in light of the worsening coronavirus outbreak in South Korea. In 2019, Hong Kong received more than 1.04 million South Korean tourists, accounting for about 8.5 per cent of non-mainland-Chinese visitors.

**US allows non-essential staff at its Hong Kong consulate to leave Hong Kong (SCMP, Feb. 13):** The United States decides to allow non-essential staff at its Hong Kong consulate to leave the city amid the coronavirus outbreak. Checks by the Post found that several other consulates had not made plans to evacuate staff, including those from the EU Office, Japan, Germany, Belgium, Indonesia and Australia. In a meeting with about 50 consuls general and foreign business leaders on Feb. 10, Chief Executive Carrie Lam was said to have appealed to diplomats to not impose travel restrictions on the city's residents and to help with supply of protective gear.

**Beijing's top diplomat in Hong Kong warns others against 'taking advantage of' coronavirus-stricken China (SCMP, Feb. 7):** Xie Feng, Beijing's top diplomat in Hong Kong, has warned other countries against "taking advantage of China" as it battles the deadly coronavirus outbreak. He also criticised the "overreaction and fearmongering" of foreign governments. "We understand and respect the necessary precautions taken by some countries, such as introducing quarantine measures for Chinese visitors at borders. But some countries have overreacted, such as identifying the virus with a particular nationality, region or race," Xie said.

### Mainland Relation

**Beijing's top official in Hong Kong makes email plea for unity, reassures city over supplies (SCMP, Feb. 20):** Luo Huining, the new director of Beijing's liaison office in Hong Kong, has written to pro-Beijing politicians in the city appealing to them for unity with mainland China in battling the coronavirus, and criticising those he said were using the crisis for political self-interest. Calling it a "political coronavirus", Luo also condemned "a few people" behind the strike by Hong Kong medical workers over the response to the outbreak, and said as long as border checkpoints remained open, ample food and hygiene supplies would continue to flow into the city.

### Domestic Policy/Politics

**As Hong Kong protests raged, police solved lowest percentage of cases in 19 years (SCMP, Feb. 28):** Hong Kong police were able to solve only a third of reported crimes last year, the lowest rate since 2001, while the number of offences surged for the first time in 13 years, reflecting the toll taken on law enforcement by months of anti-government protests and social unrest. Police handled 59,225 reports of crime in 2019, solving 21,965. The overall detection rate was 37 per cent, down from 46.5 per cent in 2018. Force insiders said the drop in the detection rate was expected because of the number of officers diverted to protest duty.

**Hong Kong schools to remain closed until after Easter (SCMP, Feb. 26):** After being shut for more than three weeks due to the Covid-19 outbreak, Hong Kong schools are to remain closed until after Easter, Secretary for Education Kevin Yeung said. Classes at all kindergartens, primary and secondary schools would be suspended until April 20 at the earliest. "The World Health Organisation and virologists have already predicted that the epidemic will last for a longer period of time, so further extending the suspension of classes is the safest option," Yeung said. University entrance exams will go ahead as planned from March 27.

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**Hong Kong to send flights to rescue residents stranded in Wuhan (SCMP, Feb. 25):** The Hong Kong government has said it will send chartered flights to rescue residents, including several pregnant women, stranded in mainland China's locked down Hubei province. Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Patrick Nip said it would be difficult to provide a time frame with about 2,700 HK residents scattered across 37 cities. The first flight will include some of the 450 residents stranded in Wuhan city, as well as emergency cases stranded in other parts of the province.

**Third airlift for Diamond Princess cruise passengers (SCMP, Feb. 23):** A total of 193 Hongkongers, as well as two Macau citizens, have been brought home on three flights arranged by the Hong Kong government. The evacuees were then taken straight to a government quarantine centre for a mandatory 14-day quarantine. But some 100 Hong Kong cruise passengers – 70 infected with the deadly coronavirus and about 30 classed as their close contacts – were still in Japan.

**Hong Kong lawmakers approve HK\$30 billion coronavirus relief package (SCMP, Feb. 21):** Hong Kong lawmakers approved a HK\$30 billion (US\$3.9 billion) government coronavirus relief package. More than half of the funding – HK\$16.9 billion – will be used to provide one-off cash injections to retailers, food and drink service providers, transport companies, students, the arts and culture sector, guest houses, and travel agents. Another HK\$10.19 billion will focus on battling the virus, with support given to the Hospital Authority, local production of surgical masks, and the purchase of more protective equipment.

**Hong Kong commerce minister warns RTHK to observe broadcasting principles (SCMP, Feb. 18):** Commerce and Economic Development Bureau has warned public broadcaster RTHK to strictly observe industry principles after more than 200 complaints were filed against a programme that implied police had stockpiled masks for officers amid a citywide shortage. The force earlier denied the allegation, saying it was based on misinformation. It also wrote to RTHK heads to express its displeasure.

**3,600 passengers and crew members on World Dream cruise stranded in Hong Kong finally leave ship after quarantine ends (SCMP, Feb. 9):** All passengers and crew members on the World Dream cruise ship quarantined in Hong Kong for four days left the vessel on Feb. 9, with control measures completed, health authorities said. All 1,800 crew members on board, who possibly had contact with eight passengers infected with the new coronavirus on a previous trip, tested negative for the disease.

**Hong Kong medical workers vote down plans to extend their strike (SCMP, Feb. 7):** After their industrial action on the fifth day, Hong Kong's striking hospital workers have voted down a plan to extend their strike but insisted they will continue to fight for better protection against the deadly new coronavirus and the full closure of the city's border with mainland China. Hospital Authority Employees Alliance began its strike on Feb. 3 after the government refused to fully shut down its border with China.

**Hong Kong to quarantine all travellers entering from mainland China for 14 days (SCMP, Feb. 5):** All travellers from mainland China entering Hong Kong, including local residents, would be required to go into quarantine for 14 days, the city's leader Carrie Lam said. Quarantine measures would be done through invoking the chief executive's special powers under the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance. The measure would take effect on Feb. 8. She said the government would also suspend immigration services at Kai Tak Cruise Terminal and Ocean Terminal. On Feb. 3, she announced a further closure of the city's borders with the mainland except for the Shenzhen Bay joint checkpoint, Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, international airport and Kai Tak Cruise Terminal.

## **Economy/Finance**

**S&P expects 'gradual weakening' of Hong Kong economy amid looming deficit, increased spending, though credit rating holds firm (SCMP, Feb. 28):** Credit rating agency S&P Credit Ratings warned that Hong Kong's looming record deficit would weaken its fiscal health, while growing social spending driven by increasingly tough challenges facing the city would only worsen the situation. Despite the hurdles, Hong Kong's credit rating – AA+ with a stable outlook – remains the same. S&P said the city's large fiscal reserve, which the government estimated to be HK\$1.13 trillion on March 30, would help absorb the budgetary expenses.

**Hong Kong's small businesses thrown vital budget lifeline (SCMP, Feb. 27):** Hong Kong businesses have been thrown an HK\$18.3 billion (US\$2.3 billion) lifeline in relief measures as the government vows to support enterprises and safeguard jobs through the economic doldrums. A full government guarantee on loans of up to HK\$2 million for each small and medium-sized enterprise and extended subsidies on utility bills were among the key measures Financial Secretary Paul Chan announced during his budget speech to help more than 3 million workers keep their jobs and ease the financial burden on companies.

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**Hong Kong's construction industry grinds to halt (SCMP, Feb. 24):** The Hong Kong Construction Industry Employees General Union said half of its 57,000 members were now unemployed, a situation it attributed to supply chain issues that had arisen since the outbreak began. The coronavirus had forced many factories in mainland China to stay shut, affecting the amount of building materials that could be brought into the city. Owing to border controls in some mainland cities, inability to ship some prefabricated parts for housing estates to Hong Kong had caused delays in projects.

**Hong Kong hotels facing 'life and death' struggle (SCMP, Feb. 19):** The Federation of Hong Kong Hotel Owners, which counts 86 owners as members running about 200 hotels and employing around 80,000 workers, said that their occupancy rate averaged at a single-digit at best amid the coronavirus outbreak, far worse than what had happened during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) outbreak in 2003 when occupancy had been in double digits. Tourism is one of Hong Kong's four pillar industries, contributing to 4.5 per cent of the city's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2018.

**Hong Kong retailers stage unprecedented strike in 14 shopping centres to demand lifeline as foot traffic plunges amid coronavirus outbreak (SCMP, Feb. 18):** Nearly 200 shops operated by 50 brands closed in 14 shopping centres across Hong Kong, as retailers staged an unprecedented strike to ask for rental cuts, as plunging foot traffic caused by months of anti-government protests and a coronavirus outbreak threatens to decimate the industry. Retailers, hotels and restaurateurs are taking the brunt of the city's economic woes, with some stores losing as much as 90% in sales compared with last year, as average daily arrivals plunged to 3,000 in February from 200,000 in the first half of 2019.

**HSBC, other banks cut Hong Kong mortgage borrowers some slack (SCMP, Feb. 14):** Hong Kong's banks piled in to offer additional relief to homeowners and businesses to support an economy hit hard first by months of anti-government protests and now by the coronavirus outbreak. They would allow residential mortgage borrowers in Hong Kong to make interest-only payments for up to a year. The HK Monetary Authority said that it held a conference call with the city's lenders to discuss extending support to retail customers and SMEs, whose cash flow pressure has increased significantly in light of the outbreak. Some landlords and commercial property owners have also stepped in, cutting rents by up to 60 per cent to help retail stores weather the slump in foot traffic.

**Coronavirus impact on Hong Kong economy could be more severe than 2003's Sars, finance chief warns (SCMP, Feb. 9):** Hong Kong's finance chief Paul Chan has warned that the economic impact of the coronavirus outbreak could be more severe than in 2003 when the city was hit by Sars. He expected more people to lose their jobs, admitting that the effects of the health crisis now were more notable because of the city's growing reliance on tourism and retail. He cited latest figures showing mainland tourists accounting for 78 per cent of arrivals, compared with 41 per cent from 2002 just before Sars outbreak.

**Hong Kong's economy shrinks 1.2 per cent in 2019 (SCMP, Feb. 4):** Hong Kong's battered economy shrank 1.2 per cent last year from 2018, the first annual contraction in a decade, with warnings of more beatings to come as the city suffered the double whammy of months of political unrest and the deadly coronavirus outbreak. Preliminary gross domestic product (GDP) decreased 2.9 per cent in the fourth quarter year on year, the Census and Statistics Department revealed. In the third quarter, GDP fell 2.8 per cent from a year earlier. A government spokesman said the economic outlook for this year would hinge on how the social unrest, coronavirus infection in Hong Kong and US-China trade relations developed, blaming the anti-government protests for the downturn.

#### **Technology/Innovation**

**PolyU develop diagnostic system to identify up to 40 types of bacteria or viruses causing respiratory infections (SCMP, Feb. 11):** Researchers from Polytechnic University (PolyU) have developed a system that can identify up to 40 types of bacteria or viruses linked to respiratory infections in around an hour. The system, which can detect pathogens including the novel coronavirus, comes as scientists around the world are racing against time to develop tests, treatments, and vaccines against the deadly virus. Professor Terence Lau at PolyU said the invention could speed up the diagnostic process for respiratory infections.

**Hong Kong researchers unveil device that can detect coronavirus infections quicker than ever (SCMP, Feb. 7):** The team, led by Weijia Wen, a physics professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, said that they had invented a cost-effective device for identifying the novel coronavirus in just 40 minutes. "The best thing is that it is fast and portable," Wen said. The device is already in use in two cities in mainland China. The breakthrough comes as experts warn of a testing-kit shortage on the mainland.

## Macao

**Macau casinos reopen to sparse crowds (SCMP, Feb. 20):** After a 15-day mandatory shutdown, Macau casinos were back in action, though gaming floors were eerily quiet and largely empty under strict new measures to guard against the spread of the coronavirus. The resumption of business at 70 per cent of Macau's casinos would be gradual, with fewer than a third of gaming tables – 1,800 – initially in operation. Macau employed more than 57,000 full-time staff across 41 casinos in 2018, according to official figures.

**Macau will give residents 2.2 billion patacas worth of vouchers to boost economy once outbreak is over (SCMP, Feb. 14):** Macau will give its residents 2.2 billion patacas (US\$274.9 million) worth of vouchers to boost the coronavirus-hit economy and distribute extra medical coupons to deal with the impact of the outbreak, officials revealed. To address a widespread shortage of masks, Macao is also setting up a production line in mainland China that will supply the protective gear to the city and other areas in the Greater Bay Area.

**Coronavirus: casinos to close in Macau for at least two weeks (SCMP, Feb. 5):** Casinos will close for two weeks in Macau to contain the spread of the deadly coronavirus after a hotel worker was locally infected, Macau's Chief Executive Ho Iat-seng said. He confirmed two more cases of the virus, bringing the city total to 10. "Macau can still withstand economic losses," Ho said. He said his government was working on the legal documentation required for the two-week ban.

## Special Focus

**Hong Kong budget: with years of deficits looming, city must find new revenue streams and areas for economic growth, experts warn (SCMP, Feb. 27):** The Hong Kong government's decision to go into the red this year – and for the next five – has sparked calls from financial experts for it to come up with a more comprehensive strategy to seek other revenue streams and identify new areas of economic growth. It was the double hit of the US-China trade war and the coronavirus epidemic that resulted in the city's first deficit of HK\$37.8 billion (US\$4.8 billion) in 15 years. The administration predicted there would be deficits over the next five years, ranging from HK\$7.4 billion to HK\$17 billion. Next year's would also hit an all-time high – of HK\$139.1 billion – because of one-off relief measures. Financial Secretary Paul Chan has been under intense pressure from lawmakers to dip into the government's large fiscal reserves of about HK\$1.1 trillion to help the city ride out the economic slump. He said after his budget speech that Hong Kong was not entering a period of structural deficits.

**China upgrades Hong Kong affairs with new chief (SCMP, Feb. 13):** Beijing has for the first time put a state leader, Xia Baolong, in charge of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office (HKMAO) that oversees Hong Kong affairs, strengthening direct supervision over the implementation of its policies in the city while reducing incumbent chief Zhang Xiaoming's authority in an unexpected demotion. Xia, the secretary general and vice-chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), will be the HKMAO's director. Besides Xia's appointment, Beijing's top envoys to Hong Kong and Macau will take up new roles in the HKMAO, too – directors Luo Huining and Fu Ziying, of the Hong Kong and Macau liaison offices respectively, will double as deputy directors of Xia's office and report to him.

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62/F, Central Plaza  
18 Harbour Road  
Wan Chai, Hong Kong  
Phone: +852 3509 5000, Fax: +852 3509 5050  
hongkong@eda.admin.ch  
www.eda.admin.ch/hongkong