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TRADE

Beijing to press ahead with Canton Fair trade show

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The spring session of the Canton Fair, the mainland's largest trade expo, will go ahead despite the global coronavirus outbreak, Premier Li Keqiang said in a statement yesterday.

Li said at a State Council meeting this week that the spring exhibition, which is expected to run from mid-April to early May, would be an important part of Beijing's efforts to "stabilise" the country's international trade.

"Against the backdrop of foreign trade and foreign investment being hit hard by the [coronavirus] epidemic, the spring

session of the fair will have a particular significance," Li said in an online statement published by the government.

"Relevant departments must prepare for the fair according to changes in the epidemic situation at home and abroad, and do everything possible to expand foreign trade and cooperation."

The decision to press on with the event in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province, has surprised many as the government has turned its focus to preventing the spread of imported cases of the virus.

All foreign arrivals in Beijing are now subject to a mandatory 14-day quarantine. The government has postponed or cancelled

a long list of events, including the National People's Congress, the annual parliamentary gathering that was set to begin on March 5, and this month's Boao Forum for Asia, a Davos-style gathering of regional business and political elites on the island of Hainan.

While the country has put a lid on the outbreak after draconian controls on people's movement, the virus' rapid global spread has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation, and the US and Europe are scrambling to contain the outbreak.

The Canton Fair, which is held twice a year, is the country's oldest exhibition. The spring session last year attracted 195,454 foreign buyers from 213 countries and

regions. The top five sources of buyers were Hong Kong, India, the US, South Korea and Thailand.

The Canton Fair was not cancelled during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) epidemic in 2003 and the spring session that year attracted 23,128 buyers from 167 countries, without a single case of infection.

Li did not say whether the spring session should be rescheduled or shortened, nor did the Ministry of Commerce, which is in charge of the fair, or the event's organising committee.

A countdown clock on the fair's website showed yesterday it would begin in 34 days.

The venue hosting the event is

still closed after the Guangzhou municipal authorities called off all exhibitions in the city in late January due to the outbreak. Guangzhou is at the forefront of the country's attempt to prevent imported cases of the coronavirus.

Exporters and traders said they were surprised by Beijing's decision amid worries about the pandemic.

Vicky Yang, a manager at Wuyi Henghai Tools from Jinhua city in Zhejiang province, said her firm would skip the event.

"We have been attending the fair for years but we won't go this time ... Many of our foreign clients have made it clear that they would not come."

Additional reporting by Orange Wang