

# 'EXTENDING MCO TO END MAY IS VITAL'

Epidemiologists say Malaysia is not out of the woods yet, even though there's been a drop in cases recently

KUALA LUMPUR

**D**ESPITE active Covid-19 cases peaking at 2,596 on April 5 and dropping consistently over the past 17 days, Malaysia is not out of the woods.

As a result, epidemiologists are calling for the Movement Control Order (MCO) to be extended on a staggered basis of 14 days up to the end of May.

Epidemiologist Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud said the downward trend in cases was encouraging, but a two-week extension was crucial to give the authorities a clearer picture.

"The number of recovered cases seems to outnumber new cases for several days, which is a good sign," said the Universiti Malaya professor.

"However, we are not out of the woods and I would caution against complacency. These signs indicate that the MCO is working, but this is an artificially-induced (situation).

"So we should err on the side of caution. If we lift the MCO too early, there may be a resurgence of cases, which may necessitate a second MCO," he said, referring to Hong Kong and Singapore extending their lockdown to break the disease's transmission.

He said based on his calculation, the infectivity rate was about one per cent, instead of the below one per cent target set by the Health Ministry.

"The mortality rate is also at 1.6 per cent, but this may not be a reliable gauge on whether the MCO should be lifted.

"It has to be read in the context of the number of tests done, and we must take into account the number of those who died of Covid-19 at home without in-

forming the authorities."

He said lifting the MCO now would expose vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and homeless, to greater risks.

While any extension would put a damper on the economy and increase the hardship of the Bottom 40 per cent group (B40), the overriding factor should be people's health, he added.

"We need to look at the bigger picture as without an MCO, a lot more people would have been infected."

"This would have overwhelmed the healthcare system and caused greater hardship to families whose breadwinners have fallen sick."

However, Dr Awang Bulgiba said, the government could start planning on how to relax curbs in areas where there were no cases.

He said it could allow more industries to operate based on physical distancing standard operating procedures and other guidelines.

"But the National Security Council should work on putting in place an early detection system to address any resurgence of the disease before allowing this.

"One way is to set up sentinel clinics in places where the guidelines are relaxed to screen those with influenza-like illnesses."

He was commenting on a drop in active Covid-19 cases in Malaysia, which saw the number of new cases falling to double digits this week.

Health Ministry data showed that the number of active Covid-19 cases, excluding those discharged and deaths, had peaked on April 5, with 2,596 infections.

This had followed an uptrend over three weeks from March 12.

Epidemiology and biostatistics expert Dr Malina Osman said the government could look into plans to lift the MCO in stages in green zones, or districts with no recorded cases.

However, the Universiti Putra Malaysia associate professor said this could be done only once the number of new cases in a zone dropped to zero.



Dr Malina Osman

"If a majority of zones have turned green, the MCO could be applied in a limited way to red or orange zones."

She said it took 14 days of no cases to declare a Covid-19 free zone.

She said the elderly and vulnerable groups had to continue staying at home and avoid going out, unless it was for buying groceries or going for a doctor's appointment.

"If they need to go out, they must wear a mask, practise social distancing and avoid crowds."

"Using the MySejahtera App is recommended. Any URTI (upper respiratory tract infection), ILI (influenza-like illness), SARI (severe acute respiratory infection) or any symptom that suggests exposure to possible sources requires prompt screening."

She said families with elderly members should ensure good hand hygiene and social distancing.

"Until a vaccine is available, kissing and hugging are not advisable."



Medical personnel testing residents of PKNS flats in Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur, for Covid-19 yesterday. BERNAMA PIC

