

SPIKE IN COVID-19 CASES

IMPOSE TEMCO ON SABAH, EXPERTS URGE

Putrajaya needs to press 'panic button' to contain pandemic, say experts

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WITH Sabah being declared a "high-risk area" with 11 people returning from the state testing positive, experts have urged that a two-week Targeted Enhanced Movement Control Order on Sabah be imposed immediately.

They believed that it was imperative for Putrajaya to press the "panic button" now to contain the pandemic before it gets worse, with an enforcement of a 14-day quarantine at government-run centres for those who returned from Sabah.

Epidemiology and biostatistics expert Dr Malina Osman said hesitance with regard to the contingency measures could result in another Movement Control Order (MCO).

"From a public health perspective, appropriate preventive measures should be taken swiftly to avoid unwanted consequences on the public," she said.

"The current situation is almost similar to the time when we were facing a political 'turmoil' last March, when the tabligh gathering slipped under the radar, prompting the first MCO. The resulting cluster only died out in early July," she said.

It was reported that 34 deaths and 3,375 positive cases were traced to the gathering.

"During that time, there was no absolute government to look after the public, just a caretaker system, which is similar to the situation in Sabah following the dissolution of the state assembly on July 30. The state is also dealing with about 80 per cent of the ac-

tive cases."

She said the situation should not be taken lightly as 851 active cases were registered yesterday, the second highest since the Recovery MCO was imposed. The highest was Friday's record of 858 cases.

She said the sharp uptrend in cases over the past week was a sign of a possible new wave.

This was also in line with what was noticed in March, when the MCO was imposed, she added.

"This is not only applicable to Sabah, but could potentially spread nationwide, particularly if appropriate measures are not followed."

Dr Malina agreed with other health experts, who stated that the scale of an election cluster could be catastrophic to the country's already stretched resources.

"The flights, the lack of physical distancing and taking off face masks for meals have all the makings of a tsunami of cases and potential clusters. The use of private jets and helicopters also means that we may be missing out carriers."

She said this was compounded by other health consequences arising from those not following the standard operating procedures (SOP) during campaigning and voting.

"Furthermore, the extension of operating hours for restaurants could also spell disaster if the SOP is not followed."

Malaysian Trades Union Congress president Datuk Abdul Halim Mansor said imposing mandatory testing and quarantine for Sabah returnees at the state's airports would be a good move.

"If they are cleared, then they can be allowed to travel. But if they are not then they should be quarantined in Sabah."

Halim said contingency measures needed to be taken seriously as Malaysia could not afford another MCO, as it cost the nation RM63 billion the last time.

It was reported that the country



An Election Commission worker disinfecting a ballot box at the SK Pulau Gaya polling centre in Pulau Gaya yesterday. BERNAMA PIC

ing activities to quarantine themselves for 14 days.

The Sabah Public Service Commission head had earlier told civil servants and voters to do so.

"If civil servants can do it, why can't the others, especially those involved in campaigning?"

Adnan said the risk was especially high for civil servants on the frontlines, such as doctors and nurses.

"Earlier, the Health Ministry revealed that 600 health workers had been infected with the virus. This cannot be taken lightly because if a large number of our health workers are infected, it would cripple the nation's healthcare facilities."

"At the end of the day, the people are the ones who will suffer because they cannot be treated."

He said a second MCO would mean that the sacrifices of the frontliners were squandered.

Malaysian Employers Federation executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan, however, said imposing mandatory quarantine for those returning from

Sabah might give the wrong message and could stoke fear and anxiety.

He said it should only be imposed on those who have had close contact with those infected or considered high risk.

"A second MCO will also badly impact the sectors and weaken the employment market, and the effects could be worse than the first MCO."

"It could even lead to a double-digit unemployment due to the higher number of businesses and employers going bust."

Economist Dr Mohd Nazari Ismail said Malaysia could not afford another MCO, even if there was a spike.

"Too many firms and individuals will be declared bankrupt. Unemployment will increase."

"We may end up having a situation of stagflation, with a stagnant economy and high inflation. The inflation will be due to the slowdown in the supply side of the economy but increased in money supply created by increased government debt."

Home quarantine for travellers from Sabah

KUALA LUMPUR: Individuals returning from Sabah must undergo mandatory home quarantine for 14 days beginning today as per the Health Ministry's Home Surveillance Order (HSO) rules.

Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said they would be subjected to Covid-19 health inspection and screening upon arrival at entry points in the peninsula and Sarawak from Sept 27 to Oct 10.

"As reported on Sept 25, 10 Covid-19 positive cases were detected among people returning from Sabah from Sept 20 to Sept 25. Today (yesterday), 11 more cases, among the returnees from Sabah, were detected in Peninsular Malaysia."

"The increase in cases and clusters in Sabah is ongoing and four districts have been identified as red zones. Therefore, from Sept 27 to Oct 10, all individuals who have just arrived from Sabah will be screened," he said yesterday.

He said they were required to download and register with the MySejahtera application and check in using the application upon arrival at the point of entry.

Upon arrival at the gate, the returnees would undergo respiratory symptomatic screening and a Covid-19 detection screening test.

"They will have to undertake a HSO. All individuals at the entry points will be given a HSO letter and a quarantine bracelet."

"HSO will start from the date of arrival at the entry point until laboratory results are obtained. HSO release will be given if test results are negative."

He said if there were those who needed to continue their journey to their homes by public transport, such as taxis, a letter of permission to go to the designated address would be given.

If returnees experienced respiratory tract infection symptoms within 14 days from the date of return, they should undergo another Covid-19 screening.

He said those arriving from Sabah would be exempted from the Covid-19 test charge fee.

On case updates, Dr Noor Hisham said no new cluster were detected yesterday. The number of cases in the country currently stood at 10,769.

He said from the 82 new cases, 79 were local transmissions and three were imported.

"The locally-transmitted cases involve 53 Malaysians and 26 foreigners, where 11 of them had returned from Sabah."

"Meanwhile, the three imported cases involve two Malaysians who returned from Yemen and Bangladesh and a foreigner from the Philippines."

He said Sabah registered the highest number of daily cases in the past 24 hours.

"The Benteng LD cluster recorded 33 new cases (11

Malaysians and 22 foreigners in Tawau), raising the total number of positive cases in the cluster to 776 (of which 337 were foreigners involving 214 Filipinos, 122 Indonesians and one Timor Leste).

"The Bangau-Bangau cluster registered 25 cases (24 Malaysians and one foreigner), bringing the total positive cases to 159 (114 Malaysians and 35 Filipinos)."

"Other cases in Sabah were detected during symptomatic screenings (three Malaysians), at the international entry point (a Malaysian who returned from the peninsula), another Clinica Malaysia with influenza-like illness at the Tawau Health, and a foreigner who was admitted at Likas Women and Children Hospital."

To date, 10,775 people linked to the Benteng LD cluster had been screened in Tawau, Lahad Datu, Kinabatangan and Sandakan.

Dr Noor Hisham said 89 Covid-19 patients had recovered and were discharged today, raising the cumulative number of recovered cases to 9,785 (90.86 per cent).

He added eight Covid-19 cases were being treated at the intensive care units, with four on ventilator support.

No new deaths were reported yesterday and the number of Covid-19 fatalities remains at 133 (1.24 per cent).

Record 115 people arrested for violating RMCO

KUALA LUMPUR: Police arrested a record 115 people on Friday for violating the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) standard operating procedures (SOP).

Senior Minister (Security Cluster) Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob said 111 were slapped with compounds, while the remaining four were remanded.

He said among the offences were failure to practise physical distancing (35), leaving the house without a reasonable excuse at Enhanced Movement Control Order areas (31) and having expired travel documents (26).

Other offences include failing to prepare equipment or entry and exit records (17), operating premises without permission (five) and not wearing a face mask (one), he said.

"The compliance operation task force, led by the police, conducted 53,695 inspections to monitor and enforce the SOP."

"A total of 2,846 compliance teams, comprising 12,356 personnel, conducted inspections at 3,458 supermarkets, 4,302 restaurants, 1,358 hawker stalls, 1,065

factories, 3,459 banks, and 630 government offices nationwide.

"Also inspected were 1,196 land, 186 water and 149 air transport terminals," he said yesterday.

Ismail Sabri, who is senior defence minister, said as part of Op Benteng that two boats and five land vehicles were confiscated, and 67 undocumented migrants were detained for attempting to enter the country via rat lanes.

On Friday, police mounted 98 Op Benteng roadblocks to prevent illegal immigrants from entering the country.

He said, from July 24 to Sept 25, the Health Ministry screened 35,116 individuals upon their arrival via the country's international gateways.

He said they were placed at 66 hotels and nine other premises, including public training institutes, in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, Penang, Johor, Sarawak, Kelantan, Perak, Kedah, Perlis, Terengganu, Sabah and Labuan.

From the total number of returnees, 7,903 individuals were put under mandatory quaran-

tine, 103 sent to hospital for treatment and 27,110 people had been discharged.

They returned from 33 countries, including the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Turkey, South Korea, Iran, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Timor Leste, Taiwan, China, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Papua New Guinea, Egypt, Spain, France, Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

Ismail Sabri said the Housing and Local Government Ministry had, since March 30, conducted 10,107 sanitation operations in 135 zones.

He said the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry's enforcement team had, on Friday, conducted daily monitoring of supplies of 12 goods at 677 business premises, including retailers (505), wholesalers (146) and manufacturers (26).

"Enforcement officers conducted 1,116 SOP inspections and found that 1,094 premises complied with the SOP, while 22 premises were advised to follow them after failing to do so."