

2020: Our dystopian year

The year 2020 has been defined by Covid-19 and will forever be identified with it, including humanity's response to it ... our feats, foibles and fumbles in dealing with a devastating global pandemic. It was also a wake-up call. We look back – with relief, and still with a little bit of anxiety.



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THERE was not a single soul on the streets of Wuhan in the Hubei province of China as the city implemented the strictest of lockdowns. Drones were on patrol, warning residents to stay indoors. A makeshift hospital rose, seemingly overnight. The few people that could be seen – police, soldiers and healthcare workers – were in hazmat suits. An eerie silence hung over the city.

It was like the setting of a dystopian movie.

Such scenes would be played out across the world in the next few months, as humanity came to a standstill. And a reckoning.

There's no sugarcoating it: 2020 was, for most of us, *annus horribilis*, a year of tragedy, misfortune and tragedy.

As we go to print, nearly 81 million people have been infected with Covid-19 and more than 1.7 million have died across the globe. In Malaysia, we've already breached the 100,000-mark when it comes to the number of infections, and more than 400 people have died.

The year 2020 has been defined by Covid-19 and will forever be identified with it, including humanity's response to it both our fumbles and our feats. Even as the world was brought to its knees, many individuals stood up and did something about it.

From microscopic to macroscopic

The popular belief is that Covid-19 started in the Huanan wet market in Wuhan, where live wild animals are traded, and that the virus somehow jumped from an animal to a human host, or what is known as a zoonotic disease.

Scientists have not verified this, and the origins of the coronavirus are still being researched. It is true, however, that the index case or patient zero – a 70-year-old man with Alzheimer's disease – began showing symptoms on Dec 1, 2019.

However, a doctor treating him said the man lived several bus rides away from the Huanan market and had not left his home. Furthermore, his family was unaffected.

According to the *South China Morning Post*, citing government data it had seen, the first case of someone suffering from Covid-19 could be traced back to Nov 17, 2019.

"Chinese authorities have so far identified at least 266 people who were infected last year, all of whom came under medical surveillance at some point," the Hong Kong daily said in a report early this year, adding that "some of the cases were likely backdated after health authorities had tested specimens taken from suspected patients".

Still, even in early January, the mysterious disease was still being described as the "Wuhan virus", portrayed as a distinctly Chinese problem.

Then it spread. The United States recorded its first case on Jan 15. Later that month, Malaysia had its first brush: Eight Chinese nationals were quarantined at a Johor Baru hotel on Jan 24 because they had been in close contact with an infected person in Singapore. Three of them tested positive.

The Health Ministry began issuing public warnings and guidelines, and designated select hospitals as quarantine and treatment centres. When cases began mounting in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah cancelled all direct flights to and from China.

On Feb 4, two new cases were reported, one a 41-year-old local man who was the first Malaysian to be infected. He had recently travelled to Singapore. Two days later, we recorded our first local transmission, involving the younger sister of the Malaysian man above.

Then came the so-called "tabligh cluster". A religious event at Masjid Jamek Sri Petaling from Feb 27 to March 1 saw many travellers congregating with locals, resulting in a spike. The Health Ministry announced that Malaysia was in late containment stage and that a special meeting would be held to discuss the next course of action.

Authorities across the world had also begun to recognise the scale and scope of the outbreak. On Feb 11, the World Health Organisation (WHO) named the disease "Covid-19", short for coronavirus disease 2019, and designated the virus as SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2). A month later, on March 11, WHO declared it a global pandemic.

"This is not just a public health crisis, it is a crisis that will touch every sector," WHO director-general Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a media briefing. "So, every sector and every individual must be involved in the fight."

An SOS to the world

It was our year of living dangerously, when all those warnings from scientists, all those apocalyptic science fiction movies and books, became a reality.



Residents within the enhanced MCO area near the PJ Old Town wet market in May, asking friends to buy goods or food for them. — CHAN TAK KONG/ The Star

On March 16, Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who had only been sworn in on March 1, announced that a two-week nationwide lockdown known as a movement control order (MCO) would come into effect on March 18.

A day before the MCO kicked in, the first two deaths were recorded in Malaysia. One was a priest in Sarawak, the other a man who had attended the Sri Petaling tabligh.

The virus had gone viral.

Murals, memes, Malaysians and the MCO

On the whole, Malaysians took to the MCO with admirable aplomb. However, there will always be a few incorrigibles.

The first MCO was a bit of a culture shock, after all. We're a nation that likes to go out. We go out to eat, we go out to shop, we go out to hang out and work out.

There were many isolated incidents of some people who seemingly did not recognise the fact that there was a pandemic. There was that doctor in Penang who wanted to walk in the park, the whole neighbourhood in the Klang Valley that had to be ordered indoors by blaring loudspeakers atop police vans, the man who needed his special noodle dish from across the Penang Bridge, the old uncle who insisted he had to have his teh tarik at his usual spot.

Still, most Malaysians adhered to MCO conditions. Heroes were born, foremost among them being the frontliners: the healthcare professionals who were risking their lives to save others, the soldiers and police who kept order, even the food delivery guys when the MCO was later relaxed, and many others in essential services who had to work throughout the period.

Three political leaders became icons: the Prime Minister himself, Senior Minister (Security) Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob and Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Hisham Noor Abdullah, the last two with their daily briefings and updates.

The trio became the subject of many a mural and loads of memes: Muhyiddin's admonition to MCO slackers to stop moving around was transformed into a series of music videos using the line "ke-sini, ke-sana (going here, going there)", while many would take bets on what colourful shirt Ismail would wear next, leading to one baker creating a host of kuih using the same kaleidoscopic colours.

But every evening, the nation would pay rapt attention to Dr Noor Hisham as he gave good news or bad, and calmly explained the intricacies of the virus and the government's



Buddhist monks at a ceremony wrapping up a 500km pilgrimage to pray for salvation from the pandemic at Bongseon Temple in Seoul in October. — AFP

efforts to combat it – while debunking much of the viral fake news that was inundating social media and WhatsApp chat groups.

Still, the pandemic did not abate. More clusters appeared here and there. While there were stages when Malaysia's response could be held up as a powerful example of an effective government and informed populace in dealing with the pandemic, cracks showed up every now and then.

This was not helped by the fact that some VVIPs and VIPs thought the rules did not apply to them, or the fact that there blind spots with how the MCO was rolled out. Many vulnerable communities were hit harder than most, and the charities and NGOs working with them could not get them the aid they desperately needed. Ordinary Malaysians came to their rescue.

When Plantation Industries and Commodities Minister Datuk Mohd Khairuddin Aman Razali returned from a trip to Turkey, accompanied by his entourage and some family members, without undergoing the mandatory 14-day quarantine, hackles were raised.

While the minister would apologise and offer to donate a few months' of his salary to the Covid-19 Fund, the simmering continued.

Furthermore, the politicking that saw the Pakatan Harapan government fall on Feb 24, had not abated either, culminating in a similar attempt to take over the Sabah state government, leading to the legislative assembly being dissolved, and the state elections being held in September.

And that, in turn, led to the mushrooming of new clusters not only in Sabah but in other states too as campaign workers returned home, many without observing Covid-19 SOPs

(standard operating procedures) or the mandatory 14-day quarantine.

The goodwill that had grown organically over the first few months of the MCO slowly dissipated and leaders from both sides of the political divide were slammed for putting their political interest above the well-being of the rakyat.

The #KitaJagaKita (we look out for all of us) hashtag was overtaken by the #RakyatJagaRakyat (the people look after the people) hashtag as many began to feel that they could not depend on the government any longer.

Some of that ire began to lift recently as the government unveiled its plans to secure as much vaccine as possible for a large part of the population.

The human and economic cost

With glimmers of hope appearing towards the end of the year and vaccinations around the corner, many people can put 2020 behind them.

It will be harder for others. Lives were destroyed, livelihoods were disrupted. Schools and educational institutions were suspended, leaving young children's learning severely under-developed and the career prospects of older students in doubt.

Many businesses closed down for good, while certain industry sectors may never recover. In July, the Statistics Department reported that the unemployment rate in Malaysia rose to 5.3 per cent in May, with 826,100 jobless people. Just earlier this month, the Human Resources Ministry revealed that 99,696 Malaysians have lost their jobs since the MCO took effect in March, up till Nov 27.



Aza Azrin Juri, 33, taking a selfie with her children (starting second from left) one-month-old baby boy Arreza Izzayne, eldest brother Arrizqy Izzan, 6, and brother Arruzain Izzul, 4, near the mural of Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah in Shah Alam. — IZZRAFIQ ALIAS/The Star



Members of medical staff wearing personal protective equipment work in the ICU of the San Filippo Neri hospital in Rome in October. Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte tightened nationwide coronavirus restrictions after the country registered a record number of new cases, despite opposition from regional heads and street protests over curfews. — AFP



(Top) A man wearing a face mask looks over a barricade set up to keep people out of a residential compound in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province on April 14, 2020. — AFP



Medical personnel on standby at a drive-through Covid-19 screening facility at Klinik Ajwa in Shah Alam, in front of a mural paying them tribute. — KK SHAM/The Star



Police and prison personnel manning a roadblock near the Seberang Perai prison and quarters which came under an enhanced MCO in October. — CHAN BOON KAI/The Star

NGOs such as the All Women's Action Society (Awam) have sounded the alarm over a spike in domestic abuse and violence cases over the course of the MCO, while psychologists have warned that the enforced lockdown and dearth of social interaction may lead to a form of post-trauma stress disorder (PTSD) in some people.

The "new normal" will be extremely dark for many.

The government has made an effort to soften the economic blow. It announced the Bantuan Prihatin Nasional (BPN) cash aid for Malaysians in the B40 and M40 groups, and the Wage Subsidy Programme to sustain employment, especially in micro, small and medium enterprises.

Last month, Finance Minister Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Abdul Aziz said a total of RM12.16bil for the Wage Subsidy Programme had been approved as at Oct 30, benefiting more than 322,284 employers and 2.639 million employees.

Meanwhile under BPN 2.0 as at Nov 3, RM4.5bil had been channelled to over 9.86 million recipients, he added.

And finally, RM3.7bil was allocated under Budget 2021 to create employment opportunities, mainly for "place and train" programmes through reskilling and upskilling courses.

'The bill will be paid'

Earlier this year, as many countries including Malaysia implemented lockdown measures and civilisation seemingly came to a halt, many remarked on how the skies and rivers were getting cleaner.

A meme went around in various forms, but which more or less said, "I feel like Mother Earth has just sent the human race to its room to think about what we have done to the environment".

It was an acknowledgement that much of what happened this year was built on decades of ignoring the warning signs.

In June, the United Nations (UN), WHO and World Wildlife Fund International (WWF) issued a joint statement, first published in *The Guardian*, warning that pandemics like Covid-19 are a direct result of the destruction of nature caused by humans.

They said that the illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade, as well as the devastation of forests and other wild places, were the driving forces behind the increasing number of diseases leaping from wildlife to humans.

"We have seen many diseases emerge over the years, such as Zika, AIDS, SARS, and Ebola and they all originated from animal populations under conditions of severe environmental pressures.

"These outbreaks are manifestations of our dangerously unbalanced relationship with nature.

"We must embrace a just, healthy, and green recovery and kickstart a wider transformation towards a model that values nature as the foundation for a healthy society.

"Not doing so, and instead attempting to save money by neglecting environmental protection, health systems, and social safety nets has already proven to be a false economy. The bill will be paid many times over," they warned.

In a separate report released by WWF on the same day, it said the increased emergence of such zoonotic diseases is linked to two widespread environmental risks:

First, it said, that driven by unsustainable food systems, the large-scale conversion of land for agriculture is increasing interactions between wildlife, livestock and humans. Land conversion is destroying and fragmenting forests and other natural habitats around the world, resulting in higher levels of contact between wildlife, livestock and humans. This problem is only set to worsen as the challenge of feeding a growing population increases and diets shift; and

Second, poor food safety standards, including permitting the trade and consumption of high-risk wildlife species, are increasing human exposure to animal pathogens. Globally, demand for wild meat is growing, as either a delicacy or a necessity, driving increased sale and consumption, and increasing the potential for exposure to diseases during high-risk sourcing, handling and preparation practices.

The UN argued that humans have "pushed nature beyond its limits", adding that in the last 50 years, the human population has doubled, and the global economy and trade have grown exponentially.

"When we destroy biodiversity, we destroy the very system that supports human life," it added.

This year of living dangerously, 2020, was our wake-up call. It remains to be seen whether we will use the insight and hindsight we've gained to make changes for the better, or whether we will mostly fall into our old ways in the "new normal".