

NEWS / Story of the Day

(15 January 2021) NewStraitsTimes, p. 2
RETURN TO NORMALCY

'ONE YEAR TO GET IMMUNITY FIREWALL'

50pc of population needs to be vaccinated first to control pandemic, says expert

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AN expert believes that even with the Movement Control Order (MCO), at least 50 per cent of the population has to be vaccinated first before the Covid-19 situation is contained and a semblance of normalcy returns.

Associate Professor Dr Malina Osman said that it would take at least a year from when the inoculation exercise begins before a significant segment of the population gains herd immunity and events, gatherings and even elections can resume.

The epidemiologist and biostatistician from Universiti Putra Malaysia, said this one-year window was needed for an "immunity firewall" to be activated to protect those who could not be vaccinated.

"We need time to reach rural areas, foreign workers, prisoners and others who are institutionalised so they can get both doses. Side-effects also need to be monitored to ensure the vaccines are safe."

She said the more than 30,000 active and rising cases, a 1,500 per cent jump from the first MCO last year, was testament to the workload of healthcare workers after a super-spreader event.

"If one healthcare employee used to deal with 30 to 40 patients daily, the figure has theoretically soared to 450 to 500 patients. This is thanks to the third wave, a lesson we learnt from the Sabah state polls."

"The outbreak has gotten worse since and is proof why we cannot

afford a general election now."

Sabah, she added, was also testament to Malaysia's lack of adherence to standard operating procedures (SOP) during polls, which makes holding a general election "a risk-factor of catastrophic proportions."

She said a one-year reprieve was also crucial to tackle the pandemic's fallout on the economy, education, mental health, non-communicable diseases as well as social and occupational functions.

Commenting on the state of emergency, Dr Malina said the move would prevent a collapse of the healthcare services due to a general election, something an MCO would not be able to prevent.

She lashed out at instances of high-profile people breaking the SOP, which she said had not helped the situation.

"There were plenty of loopholes during the Conditional MCO, which means laws, such as the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 (Act 342), are not enough."

The public, she said, was developing SOP fatigue and had begun breaking social distancing rules.

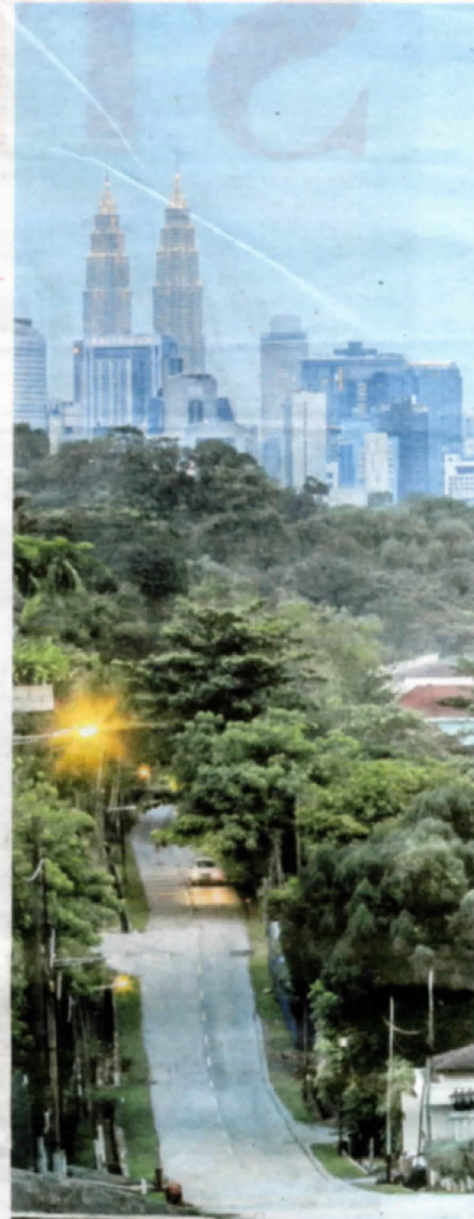
She said with the Emergency, the authorities were honour-bound to ensure that there were no double standards in ensuring compliance.

Dr Safiya Amaran, a public health expert and medical lecturer at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, said the Emergency would put a pause on politics and enable the National Security Council to draft SOP and rules.

Having an election now, she said, was a terrible idea, quoting models suggesting that Malaysia's case projection had surpassed Indonesia and the Philippines' case trajectories.

She said the lack of clarity in SOP could be seen as far back as the early stages of the CMCO in the Klang Valley.

"The SOP were unclear and not strict enough, and that's why green zones in Kelantan and Te-



A man taking a jog in Jalan Tunku Putra, Kuala Lumpur, on the second day of the Movement Control Order yesterday. PIC BY ASYRAF HAMZAH

rengganu turned red."

Dr Safiya said Malaysia was fortunate to have scraped by relatively unscathed during the Tabligh cluster.

"We don't need a second lesson, especially when we are still dealing with the outcome of the Sabah election."

Epidemiologist Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud warned of SOP fatigue and that the authorities needed to rope in behavioural and communication experts to deal with the issue.

"We bought time with MCO 1.0, but squandered it and did not address many issues that I had long ago raised, such as migrant workers, implementation of the amended Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities Act 1990, syndromic surveillance, better data analysis, better indicators, scenario planning, and revision of the Pandemic Preparedness Plan."

"We need to institute steps that will prepare us for the next wave. If we do not do something about these issues, then the time we are buying with MCO 2.0 will be squandered again."



3,337 daily cases another record

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia yet again broke its record for the highest number of daily Covid-19 cases, registering 3,337 infections in the past 24 hours.

This raised the cumulative infections to 147,855.

The new infections eclipsed the previous highs of 3,309 cases on Jan 12 and 3,027 cases on Jan 7.

Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said 3,330 infections were local transmissions.

The majority of the 3,337 cases came from six states and Federal Territories where the Movement Control Order (MCO) is in place.

These states racked up 2,519 cases, or 75.49 per cent of the total.

Selangor topped the list with 1,036 cases, followed by Johor (460), Sabah (389), the Federal Territories (315), Penang (234) and Melaka with 85.

In the Federal Territories, there were 257 cases in Kuala Lumpur, 24 in Putrajaya and 34 in Labuan.

States under the Conditional MCO accounted for 19 per cent of the total, or 634 cases, with Negri Sembilan recording the most cas-

es at 169, followed by Pahang (113), Perak (92), Terengganu (89), Kedah (86) and Kelantan (85).

Perlis and Sarawak, which are under the Recovery MCO, had a combined 184 cases (5.51 per cent).

There were 180 cases in Sarawak and four in Perlis.

Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said in Selangor, 795 new cases came from existing Covid-19 clusters as well as the result of close-contact screenings.

He added that 153 cases were linked to lock-up clusters, Immigration detention centres as well as prisons: Tembok Mempaga cluster (63), Tropika cluster (51), Jalan Harapan Prison cluster (34), Kepadayan Prison cluster (two), Tembok Choh cluster (one), Tembok Gajah cluster (one), and Pagar Siput Cluster (one).

He said seven new clusters detected originated in the peninsula, with four linked to workplaces.

The total number of active clusters stands at 276.

Among the seven clusters, the Jalan Rantau-Siliau cluster in

Port Dickson, Negri Sembilan, logged the highest number of cases over the past 24 hours at 96.

He said the country reported its second highest number of deaths at 15 up to yesterday, bringing the number of Covid-19 fatalities to 578.

Malaysia's previous deadliest day was on Jan 8 when 16 deaths were recorded.

Sabah accounted for the highest number of deaths at eight, where the oldest and youngest female patients, aged 91 and 27, died at Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Kota Kinabalu.

Selangor reported three deaths, followed by Johor with two deaths while Putrajaya and Negri Sembilan recorded one fatality each.

The majority of yesterday's fatalities had a history of chronic diseases, with 11 being diabetic patients.

Meanwhile, 195 Covid-19 patients are being treated at Intensive Care Units, including 86 on respiratory support.

Dr Noor Hisham said 1,710 patients had recovered up to noon yesterday.