

WORST-CASE SCENARIO

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ZAFRUL: NO TOTAL ECONOMIC LOCKDOWN

Minister says govt will enforce more stringent SOP should Covid-19 cases remain high

KUALA LUMPUR

FINANCE Minister Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Tengku Abdul Aziz has given the assurance that Malaysia will not implement a total lockdown on the economy even if the worst-case scenario comes true.

Instead, he said, the government would continue to focus on enforcing more stringent standard operating procedures (SOP) should the number of Covid-19 cases remain high.

"Based on the current model, we believe that the number of cases will go down.

"Assuming the worst-case scenario (did come true), it will not be a total lockdown on the economy, (but) we will continue to focus on (implementing) more stringent SOP," he said in an interview with CNBC yesterday.

Tengku Zafrul was responding to a question on whether the government would shut down certain sectors if the Movement Control Order 2.0 were to be extended, or in the event the Covid-19 vaccine rollout did not meet the expected results.

He said if the number of cases

continued to rise, core issues such as the adherence to and enforcement of the SOP should be addressed instead.

Meanwhile, Tengku Zafrul dismissed the notion that the recent increase in the ringgit against the US dollar would impact the export performance.

"Yes, the ringgit has strengthened against the US dollar and other currencies, but as global trade is forecasted to grow about eight per cent in 2021 versus 2020, Malaysia stands to benefit from that.

"And I believe the ringgit's performance would not have an adverse impact on the exports."

Tengku Zafrul also expressed confidence that the Covid-19 national vaccination programme, expected to be completed by the first quarter of 2022 (1Q22), would further drive the economic recovery.

He said Malaysia was expected to receive the first batch of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine by the end of next month.

"The vaccine rollout is expected to take place in early March and completed in about 12 months' or by 1Q22."

Set to begin in early March, the Covid-19 national vaccination programme will be implemented in phases over a period of 12 to 18 months, with 80 per cent of the population, or close to 27 million people, expected to be inoculated by 1Q22.

Meanwhile, Tengku Zafrul said Malaysia continued to maintain

its 2021 gross domestic product (GDP) growth forecast at 6.5 to 7.5 per cent and fiscal deficit target of 5.4 per cent of the GDP this year.

He said the economy would be supported by the recently announced RM15 billion Perlindungan Ekonomi dan Rakyat Malaysia (Permai) assistance package, which aims to assist various sectors, as well as the micro and small- and medium-sized enterprises.

Asked if there were risks that the fiscal deficit would widen should the government need to spend more to combat the rising Covid-19 cases, Tengku Zafrul shrugged off the jitters.

"Should we need further fiscal injection to stimulate the economy, it would have an impact on the deficit target. But it (the fiscal injection) will help (the growth of) the revenue and the GDP, so the target (of 5.4 per cent) should remain the same."

Tengku Zafrul said the government was closely monitoring the Covid-19 situation.

"If there is a need for further injection to revive the economy for the short term, this is something that the government has to do.

"But today, we still maintain the budget (2021 Budget), which was recently approved by the government."

Malaysia recorded 4,094 new Covid-19 cases on Thursday, taking the country's infection tally to 198,208. **Bernama**



Ajwa Clinic medical personnel Dr Arisman Wenge Abd Rahman (left) and Ummi Nadzirah Mohamad Airah preparing to conduct Covid-19 screening in Shah Alam yesterday. PIC BY FAIZ ANUAR

PRIVATE SECTOR PLAYERS

Experts: Govt must regulate vaccine distributorship process

KUALA LUMPUR: While the move by private companies to secure Covid-19 vaccine distributorship is seen as a way to allow more Malaysians to be vaccinated, it may also lead to a reduction in vaccine supply to the government.

Experts say the purchase by private companies could interfere with the government's procurement of 25 million doses of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines next month to inoculate 39 per cent of the population this year.

Sunway University Business School of Economics Professor Dr Yeah Kim Leng said the increased vaccine demand caused by the entry of more buyers in the international market would bid up prices and might result in hoarding, thereby disrupting the government's procurement plan in terms of cost, delivery or rollout.

"If it involves protracted and complex negotiations, supplies to the government may be slowed down, especially if the vaccine producers prioritise buyers that pay higher prices or order large quantities.

"The government would then need to engage with the vaccine manufacturers directly as pri-

private purchasers are willing to pay more (and the government may have to wait longer). The government could also leverage on government-to-government relationships in cases involving state-owned enterprises.

"Given that the government already possesses information on vaccine prices from the various manufacturers, as well as those in other countries, it is in a better position to negotiate with private purchasers to ensure that the profits are not excessive.

"Instituting open tenders and ensuring transparency and full disclosure by the government can help to curb leakages and abuse in the procurement contracts," he told the *New Straits Times* yesterday.

Dr Yeah said it was understandable that many private companies were jumping onto the bandwagon to be Covid-19 vaccine distributors as the government had announced a RM3 billion allocation for vaccination.

He said even companies in unrelated industries would be interested in getting a piece of the pie, where the business opportunity basically involved the

ability to secure the vaccines in the international market and profit from the mark-ups.

He added that arranging for the logistics and vaccination rollout, if included, were services that could be provided through sub-contracting.

"If the involvement of private sector helps to reduce the overall costs to the government and achieve the desired coverage of the population quicker, then it is a welcome public-private partnership.

"But if there are leakages and arrangements that enrich the selected firms, then it should not be allowed."

In December last year, Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Khairy Jamaluddin reportedly told the Dewan Rakyat that the government had directly procured Covid-19 vaccines with pharmaceutical company Pfizer under the Covax Facility without the involvement of middlemen.

He said arrangements by private companies to secure the vaccines were purely commercial deals that had nothing to do with the government, but required the National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency's (NPRA) approval.

With global vaccine manufacturing capacity and economies of scale ramped up, Dr Yeah opined that prices were expected to decline.

"In addition, as more vaccines by different manufacturers are approved, there will be opportunities for firms to ink new distributorships as long as the Covid-19 threat persists and the

population is not vaccinated to the desired extent."

Epidemiologist Professor Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud said Malaysia could face a slow rollout if the government was procuring the same vaccines as the companies.

Dr Awang Bulgiba, who is the Science, Technology and Innovation Ministry's head of Independent Covid-19 Vaccination Advisory Committee, also expressed concern over companies independently acquiring vaccine distributorship.

It could affect the government's efforts to monitor the vaccine's effectiveness, its side effects and who had or had not been vaccinated, he said.

"This may pose complications. We would not be sure if we have reached the proposed herd immunity threshold if there is no central monitoring. We cannot compute the actual effectiveness of these vaccines, and an immunity or vaccine passport will be difficult to create.

"If the government does not have data on these vaccines, there will be uncertainty about the overall vaccination achievement in the country.

"Private healthcare facilities are unlikely to be part of a central monitoring mechanism unless the government mandates this.

"Some kind of mechanism needs to be worked out by the government, and fast, before more companies jump in and start to make things more complicated."

Another concern, he said, was how the vaccines were handled,

as well as the adverse effects after one had received them.

"The patient's condition has to be observed. If these vaccines do not require ultra-low temperature freezers and can just use the normal cold chain, this is not a problem for healthcare facilities, which monitor their cold chain.

"But for smaller clinics that do not monitor this cold chain properly, vaccines can degrade if not stored properly.

"Covid-19 vaccines are new vaccines and monitoring for side effects is absolutely essential. Should adverse events happen in these vaccinees, there may not be a proper investigation and these adverse events may be exploited by anti-vaxers."

Melaka Manipal Medical College Community and Occupational Medicine Professor Dr G. Jayakumar, on the other hand, said the purchase by private companies should be viewed as complementing the government's effort to vaccinate the population.

The distribution of vaccines, he said, should be managed by healthcare providers from either the government or private sector. However, he cautioned that the government must regulate the process with checks and balances to weed out opportunist companies, adding that if there was no regulation, more companies would rush in to have a bite of the profit pie at the expense of the population's wellbeing.

Dr Jayakumar also felt capping the price of vaccines was another way to prevent the system from being abused. **By Dawn Chan**

16 FATALITIES RECORDED

RECORD HIGH OF 5,725 CASES YESTERDAY

Selangor contributes highest number of new infections at 3,126 cases, says Health D-G

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MALAYSIA hit a new daily record in the number of Covid-19 cases with 5,725 infections reported up to noon yesterday.

It was the first time the country breached the 5,000 mark in daily cases, and it topped the previous highest jump in daily infections on Jan 23, which was at 4,275.

The staggering figure was also a huge jump from the number of infections a day earlier, when there were 4,094 new cases.

Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said, in a statement yesterday, Selangor contributed the highest number of new infections at 3,126 cases.

"From the total, 2,559 cases were from clusters and close-contact screening actively conducted on the field. This is followed by 687 cases in Kuala Lumpur and 684 in Johor."

The remaining 419 daily cases involved clusters at lock-ups, Immigration detention depots and prisons, which comprise the Jalan Harapan Prison cluster with 224 cases, Jalan Sungai Jelok Prison (116), Tembok Renggam (45), Tembok Sungai Udang (16), Tembok Mempaga (11), Tembok Taiping (five) and Tembok Bukit Besi (two).

The latest figures brought the cumulative number of cases since the pandemic hit the country to 203,933, of which 45,478 are active cases.

Out of the total number of new infections, 5,718 were locally transmitted, while seven cases were imported involving five locals and two foreigners.

Sixteen Covid-19 fatalities were recorded yesterday, all involving Malaysians aged between 36 and

93 with underlying health conditions. It brought the death toll to 733.

"Nine deaths were recorded in Selangor, two in Sabah and one each in Kuala Lumpur, Sarawak, Melaka, Kelantan and Perak," Dr Noor Hisham said.

"The ministry expresses its deepest condolences to the victims' families."

A total of 301 cases are being treated at the Intensive Care Unit, 115 of whom are intubated.

A total of 3,423 patients recovered and were discharged from hospitals up to noon yesterday. This is lower than the number of new cases reported to the ministry over the past 24 hours.

This brings the total number of recoveries to 57,722 or 77.34 per cent of the total cases.

The Health Ministry has detected 12 new clusters with 10 involving workplaces and two within the community.

Dr Noor Hisham said five of the clusters were detected in Johor. They are the Jalan Kota Burok, Jalan By Pass, Jalan Bistari Dua, Jalan Empayar and Jalan Rusa Scientex clusters.

"Two clusters involving workplaces have been detected in Selangor, which are the Persiaran Subang and Industri Indah clusters."

"Another two clusters were detected in Kuala Lumpur known as Tapak Bina Jalan Klang and Tapak Bina Jalan Vista. One workplace cluster was detected in Sabah, namely Jalan Sepanggar."

The remaining two community clusters were detected in Sabah (Tinanom) and Sarawak (Tabong).

On active clusters, Dr Noor Hisham said there were 375 clusters nationwide, while the highest number of new infections were recorded from the Tanjung Suria cluster at 385 cases.

It is followed by Jalan Harapan Prison cluster (224) and Jalan Sungai Jelok Prison cluster (116).

He also announced that nine clusters ended yesterday, which are the Alor, Nahaba Integra Ikon, Bukit Naga, Tapak Bina Metropolis, Tapak Bina Jalan Gadang, Tapak Bina Kasih, Tapak Bina Sinar View and Tapak Bina Residen clusters.

DAVOS 2021

AZIZ: MOVEMENT CONTROL ORDER COULD COST MALAYSIA MYR600 MN A DAY

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Finance Minister Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Tengku Abdul Aziz speaking during an interview with CNBC yesterday. PIC TAKEN FROM ASTRO AWANI FB PAGE

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