

COVID-19 SPREAD

'KELANTAN MAY END UP LIKE SABAH'

Aggressive measures like TEMCO need to be imposed, says virologist

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KELANTAN risks becoming like Sabah in the rise of Covid-19 infections if aggressive containment measures like the Targeted Enhanced Movement Control Order (TEMCO) are not imposed on the state immediately.

Universiti Malaya Tropical Infectious Diseases Research and Education Centre (Tidrec) director Professor Dr Sazaly Abu Bakar said the nine-fold increase in Covid-19 cases in Kelantan, especially from the Mengketil cluster, which had 41 cases within five days, was troubling.

The virologist said this was because the population had a high prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCD), such as diabetes and hypertension.

"If the number keeps going up, there is no choice but to impose Temco on the affected areas. We don't want Kelantan to be the next Sabah, which also charted a high number of deaths," he told the *New Sunday Times*.

He said despite the rising cases in Selangor, the number of deaths were relatively low, and this could be due to the possibility of a lower NCD rate in the state compared with Kelantan.

"It might be a ticking time-bomb. When the government announced the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) in the Klang Valley on Oct 14, many knowingly travelled from here back to their hometowns, including Kelantan, ahead of time.

"There could be asymptomatic people who are spreading the disease," he said.

Sazaly said the fact that Kelantan had remained a green zone for so long had also worked against it, as it could also mean that the community had a lower herd immunity. The dearth of cases could also fuel complacency among the people.

He, however, said the danger of a wildfire-like spread could be higher if the community remained ignorant of the dangers of Covid-19 and did not adhere to standard operating procedures (SOP).

Sazaly hypothesised that as Kelantan people were very sociable, which was reflected in their socio-economic activities, extra measures would be necessary to help them adapt to new rules.

"The onus is on the public to contain the spread. They cannot keep relying on the Health Ministry to do everything and treat patients at the same time."

On the number of Covid-19 strains circulating, Sazaly said besides the Health Ministry, other scientists had no access to virus samples or data.

Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah had said that the ministry would probe whether the rapid infection rate in the state was due to a new virulent strain.

Sazaly didn't deny the possibility that Dr Noor Hisham could be referring to the super-spreader D1614G strain, which is newer but had been in circulation for a while.

"It is also possible that we are dealing with a new strain, due to the multiple entries from all over the world. This is the natural progression of the virus, as every virus is expected to mutate with time, and new hosts and exposure to different environments.

"And even if it's a new strain, we still need to break the chain of transmission."

Epidemiologist Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud



Professor Dr Sazaly Abu Bakar



Policemen manning a roadblock in Pulau Chondong, Machang, following the implementation of the Conditional Movement Control Order in Kelantan yesterday. BERNAMA PIC

however, said one had to look at the overall context in Kelantan and gauge if contact-tracing efforts were successful in containing the cluster.

"The incidence rate for Kelantan is low, if we take into account all 87 active cases between Nov 8 and Nov 21.

"Going by that number, the incidence rate is 4.6 per 100,000 population, which is below the national average."

Asked whether a CMCO was required across the country to contain the spread, Dr Awang Bulgiba said that it was time for a revamp of public health strategies to be considered instead of depending on piecemeal strategies.

On whether the CMCO could be lifted in the Klang Valley on Dec 6, Dr Awang Bulgiba said the numbers were not significantly slowing down in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur.

"If the CMCO was based on this premise, then I suppose the authorities will need to see a sustained decrease in new cases before deciding on this.

"As Dec 6 is more than two weeks away, it is difficult to get a clear picture."

He said judging by the trajectory, it was unlikely that the borders would be opened in January.

"Other countries around us — except for Singapore, and Thailand with a lower testing rate — are still reporting high numbers. Europe and the United States, not to mention South American countries, are going through their second wave, which is worse than the first."