

Malaysia Must Unite - COVID-19 will not respect ethnic, religious or political boundaries

Although the number of deaths and new cases of COVID-19 in China appears to be stabilizing with containment measures, COVID-19 is now experiencing local transmission in Malaysia and many other countries in all continents. The Ministry of Health has responded with utmost professionalism in handling these cases and deserves the kudos given by health professionals¹ and global authorities². However, a major outbreak of COVID-19 will require balanced and coordinated responses beyond the Ministry of Health (the whole-of-government) and beyond the government (the whole-of society) – i.e., Malaysia has to act together.

Containment and mitigation strategies must be calm, timely, balanced, effective, coordinated, and based on current global consensus and evidence. Such strategies should include public and private childcare centres, kindergartens, schools, universities, and aged care centres, which are under the responsibility of multiple ministries, local authorities, and the private sector. Beyond just the tourism sector, employers and businesses such as retailers and service providers should be engaged and supported in a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. Spread associated with religious meetings have been significant in several countries. Therefore, engagement with religious authorities, state governments and civil society is critical.

Crucially, strategies must be well-communicated with the public, so that the public will remain calm and be informed of how and when to seek care appropriately from clinics, hospitals, and/or designated entry points into the healthcare system, remembering that the vast majority (at least 80%) of COVID-19 cases will either have mild or no symptoms.

COVID-19 can be spread by infected persons who appear well, has a long and variable incubation period, may spread by faeces and animals, and, importantly, stirs social stigma. Malaysia's climate is warm and humid, but strategies should not assume this climate will impede the spread of COVID-19, a novel virus, until this is proven and wider evaluation confirms the degree of local transmission. An effective vaccine is not expected soon and no antiviral treatment is currently proven to be effective. These features should inform current strategies as many of these features differentiate COVID-19 from expectations of pandemic influenza, for which the National Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Plan was written in 2006.

Although measures to contain COVID-19 would invariably separate us physically to prevent spread, we call on all quarters across all sectors and all affiliations to 'come together' in unity urgently to address COVID-19 for Malaysia's sake.

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Signatories:

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And 42 additional signatories from civil society organizations and individuals representing community and religious leaders, health professionals, academia, NGOs, employers, employees, consumers, and the tourism, education, and aged care sector.

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¹ Protect the rakyat's health during political transitions <https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/512608>

² 18th of 195 countries measured using the Global Health Security Index 2019 <https://www.ghsindex.org/>

Organizations

3. Prof Dato' Dr ADEEBA KAMARULZAMAN Dean of Medicine, Universiti Malaya
4. Mr AMRAHI BUANG President, Malaysian Pharmaceutical Society
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10. Dr HELMY HAJA MYDIN Co-founder, Asthma Malaysia
11. Mr J SOLOMON Secretary-General, Malaysian Trades Unions Congress
12. Dr JEFFREY ABU HASSAN President, Islamic Medical Association Malaysia
13. Archbishop JULIAN LEOW Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur
14. The Most Ven Datuk K SRI DHAMMARATANA Chief High Priest of Malaysia, Buddhist Maha Vihara
15. Mr LAU CHEE BOON Chairman, LLG Cultural Development Centre
16. Sis LOH PAI LING President, Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia
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20. Datuk MUNIRAH ABDUL HAMID President, Muslim Women's Action Society (PERTIWI)
21. Haji MUSTAFA ABD MAJID President, Malaysian Association of Medical Assistants
22. Bishop ONG HWAI TEIK President, Council of Churches Malaysia
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24. A/Prof Dr PANG YONG KEK President, Malaysian Thoracic Society
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