

## Impose TEMCO on Sabah, experts urge

By [Veena Babulaj](#) - September 27, 2020 @ 10:30am



Experts says it is imperative for Putrajaya to press the "panic button" now to contain Covid-19 before it gets worse. -NSTP/File pic

KUALA LUMPUR: With Sabah being declared a "high-risk area" with 11 people returning from the state testing positive, experts have urged that a two-week Targeted Enhanced Movement Control Order on Sabah be imposed immediately.

They believed that it was imperative for Putrajaya to press the "panic button" now to contain the pandemic before it gets worse, with an enforcement of a 14-day quarantine at government-run centres for those who returned from Sabah.

Epidemiology and biostatistics expert Dr Malina Osman said hesitance with regard to the contingency measures could result in another Movement Control Order (MCO).

"From a public health perspective, appropriate preventive measures should be taken swiftly to avoid unwanted consequences on the public," she said.

"The current situation is almost similar to the time when we were facing a political 'turmoil' last March, when the tabligh gathering slipped under the radar, prompting the first MCO. The resulting cluster only died out in early July," she said.



Dr Malina Osman.

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It was reported that 34 deaths and 3,375 positive cases were traced to the gathering.

"During that time, there was no absolute government to look after the public, just a caretaker system, which is similar to the situation in Sabah following the dissolution of the state assembly on July 30. The state also contributes to about 80 per cent of active cases.."

She said the situation should not be taken lightly as 851 active cases were registered yesterday, the second highest since the Recovery MCO was imposed. The highest was Friday's record of 858 cases.

She said the sharp uptrend in cases over the past week was a sign of a possible new wave.

This was also in line with what was noticed in March, when the MCO was imposed, she added.

"This is not only applicable to Sabah, but could potentially spread nationwide, particularly if appropriate measures are not followed."

Dr Malina agreed with other health experts, who stated that the scale of an election cluster could be catastrophic to the country's already stretched resources.

"The flights, the lack of physical distancing and taking off face masks for meals have all the makings of a tsunami of cases and potential clusters. The use of private jets and helicopters also means that we may be missing out carriers."

She said this was compounded by other health consequences arising from those not following the standard operating procedures (SOP) during campaigning and voting.

"Furthermore, the extension of operating hours for restaurants could also spell disaster if the SOP is not followed."



An Election Commission worker disinfecting a ballot box at the SK Pulau Gaya polling centre in Pulau Gaya yesterday. - BERNAMA pic

Malaysian Trades Union Congress president Datuk Abdul Halim Mansor said imposing mandatory testing and quarantine for Sabah returnees at the state's airports would be a good move.

"If they are cleared, then they can be allowed to travel. But if they are not then they should be quarantined in Sabah."

Halim said contingency measures needed to be taken seriously as Malaysia could not afford another MCO, as it cost the nation RM63 billion the last time.

It was reported that the country had bled RM2.4 billion a day during the six weeks of the MCO, and the gross domestic product contracted by six per cent, forcing hundreds of thousands out of their jobs.

"We are expected to see 1.2 million people lose their jobs by year end. This is despite the unemployment rate reducing to 4.7 per cent two months ago, following May's peak of 5.3 per cent."

"Thousands would also only be employed in name, forced to go on leave without pay, or forced to take a pay cut as all sectors and industries would grind to a halt."

He said a lack of political will to impose the measures would also mean that all the good done through the multibillion-ringggit stimulus packages would be wasted.

Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services president Adnan Mat said the daily spike in active cases in Lahad Datu, Tawau, Semporna and Kunak was disturbing.

He had earlier called the government to instruct those involved in campaigning and voting activities to quarantine themselves for 14 days.

The Sabah Public Service Commission head had earlier told civil servants and voters to do so.

"If civil servants can do it, why can't the others, especially those involved in campaigning?"

Adnan said the risk was especially high for civil servants on the frontlines, such as doctors and nurses.

"Earlier, the Health Ministry revealed that 600 health workers had been infected with the virus. This cannot be taken lightly because if a large number of our health workers are infected, it would cripple the nation's healthcare facilities.

"At the end of the day, the people are the ones who will suffer because they cannot be treated."

He said a second MCO would mean that the sacrifices of the frontliners were squandered.

Malaysian Employers Federation executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan, however, said imposing mandatory quarantine for those returning from Sabah might give the wrong message and could stoke fear and anxiety.

He said it should only be imposed on those who have had close contact with those infected or considered high risk.

"A second MCO will also badly impact the sectors and weaken the employment market, and the effects could be worse than the first MCO.

"It could even lead to double-digit unemployment rates due to the higher number of businesses and employers going bust."

Economist Dr Mohd Nazari Ismail said Malaysia could not afford another MCO, even if there was a spike.

"Too many firms and individuals will be declared bankrupt. Unemployment will increase."

"We may end up having a situation of stagflation, with a stagnant economy and high inflation. The inflation will be due to the slowdown in the supply side of the economy but increased in money supply created by increased government debt."