

11th hour plea for extension

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Thorough check: Medical officer Dr Annette Antonisamy taking a Covid-19 swab sample from an Indonesian worker at KPJ Tawakkal Specialist Hospital in Kuala Lumpur. — AZHAR MAHFOF/The Star

PETALING JAYA: With just 24 hours left until the deadline to screen foreign workers for Covid-19, a number of employers are pleading for another month-long extension to get the job done.

An estimated 30% of its 20,000 members had yet to send their workers for testing, said Malaysia Singapore Coffeeshop Proprietors' General Association president Datuk Ho Su Mong.

He said MCO 2.0 and the conditional MCO in some states had delayed some employers in sending their foreign workers for screening.

“There has also been an increase in business lately, so there is a delay. We feel there should be an extension until April 30 so that the employers can send them for screening without having to rush,” he said.

The Federal Government has made it mandatory for all foreign workers to be screened for Covid-19 from Feb 1 onwards, with the initial deadline of Feb 28 extended to March 31 following the emergence of large clusters of infected foreign workers.

Failure to meet the deadline could result in their workers’ passes not being renewed.

Malaysian Muslim Restaurant Owners Association (Presma) president Datuk Jawahar Ali Taib Khan believes that a one-month extension with a strict warning would be helpful.

Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan appealed to the government to not enforce the ruling to bar the renewal of passes for foreign workers who had not been screened.

“There will be those who may not have been fully screened by March 31. I think there needs to be an extension because there will be employers who will not be able to meet the deadline.

“With the current Covid-19 situation, I don’t think they should be penalised. This is because occasionally, they will have problems in trying to get an appointment with the doctors,” he said.

On March 22, Human Resources Minister Datuk Seri M. Saravanan said nearly 1.5 million foreign workers had been screened with around 1.2 million of them from the manufacturing, construction, plantation and agricultural sectors.

According to MEF’s estimates, the total number of foreign workers in the country is four million, with 2.3 million of them being legal workers.

SME Association of Malaysia president Datuk Michael Kang concurred that additional time was needed, though he noted that most SMEs had probably already complied with the deadline.

Real Estate and Housing Developers’ Association Malaysia (Rehda) president Datuk Soam Heng Choon said the construction sector would comply with the deadline as long as the government made testing facilities more accessible.

“The reason why some employers have not sent their workers for testing is because of the cost and the bottleneck at the testing facilities.

“If they can’t get to the testing centres, the government should bring the facilities to the place of work,” he said, adding that the Construction Industry Development Board’s move to subsidise testing had helped to encourage employers to get it done.

Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers president Tan Sri Soh Thian Lai said the extension of the deadline from Feb 28 to March 31 was ample time to have completed the screenings.

As such, for the manufacturing industry, Soh said they had not received any requests from members for additional time to complete the screening or feedback on delays experienced.

In George Town, FMM Penang vice-chairman Datuk Lee Teong Li said its members had sent 90% of their foreign workforce for screening.

“The relevant authorities even visited some of the factories twice. If they didn’t comply, the authorities imposed penalties,” Lee said yesterday.

FMM Penang members employ more than 10,000 foreign workers. The Penang branch has 360 members, of which 75% are SMEs.

The Free Industrial Zone Penang, Companies Association (Frepenca) committee member Datuk Heng Huck Lee also said most foreign workers engaged by Frepenca had been tested.

Frepenca has about 70 members.

Between Dec 1 last year and March 25 this year, 651,081 foreign workers have been screened. Of that number, 10,034 tested positive for Covid-19.