



CDiSS COMMENTARY

National Defence University Malaysia (NDUM)
Centre for Defence and International Security Studies (CDiSS)

cdisscommentary.upnm.edu.my

No. 27 – 25 March 2020

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COVID-19: MALAYSIA CAN'T AFFORD ANOTHER BLUNDER

By
BA Hamzah



Dire situation requires dire solution.

Now facing an approaching medical crisis of unprecedented severity, Malaysia has been so disastrously slow in acting that only dramatic action, possibly with the intervention of the country's military in the form of medical assistance, may be necessary.

Bringing in the military would be a radical course given the country's long history of civilian control although the military has already been patrolling the streets to enforce a two-week curfew on travel. But the essence of national

strategy in combating COVID-19 involves going further, revolving around early detection, medication, hospitalization, trust and effective enforcement. Deploying the military in time of national crisis would help strengthen police enforcement and further enhance the trust among the people who wish to see the authorities punish those flouting movement control orders.

The military could also help lessen the strain on government resources. Although the traditional role of the military is to prepare and win wars against external enemies, it has assets and proven experience in managing national crises. It has a medical corps and a few large hospitals. Many retired military doctors and nurses could be quickly mobilized to assist.

The military is also trained to build and operate mobile field hospitals that would come handy. For instance, Malaysian military personnel built a large field hospital for Rohingya refugees from Myanmar violence at Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh in 2017. It still operates the hospital.

To bring out the best from the military, the authorities need to ensure a proper chain of command, responsibility, authority as well as the rules of engagement of their deployment in joint operations. Regular military personnel should be deployed along the borders, at sea and in the air to stop foreigners entering the country illegally leaving the police and para-military personnel to do road blocks and street patrolling. As in most things, turf management is critical. More so in crisis time.

The fact is that the new government has fumbled the situation, probably clouded by the state of political uncertainty in the nation after the February 22 collapse of Pakatan Harapan. Less than three weeks after being sworn in as Malaysia's eighth Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin called for a partial lockdown, a response that was too little too late. In hind sight, a total lockdown would have been a better option.

The *rakyat* - the common citizenry - have paid a heavy price. An Islamic religious congregation of 16,000 people from February 27 to March 1 in Kuala Lumpur should have been called off. It has been blamed for a sudden spike in dozens of infections although without it the virus spread would have probably gone unchecked from government inaction as public places like schools, universities, parks, shopping malls, restaurants etc. were still open while authorities ignored the problem.

Fortunately, so far no one has been reported infected from a bigger congregation of 34,000 on February 28 for a football game in which Johore beat Kedah by one goal which also should have been postponed.

No point crying over spilt milk!

Political impasse aside, the policy makers should have nipped the problem soon after the news leaked out from the epicentre at Wuhan and its subsequent appearance in Singapore, which took dramatic and effective action in slowing its spread.

The nation now pays for its delayed action and gross misjudgement. To avoid another blunder, we must now also adopt the tough measures introduced in China, Singapore and South Korea to name just a few places. The war against COVID-19 must go beyond public health concerns as it has taken a national security twist. While the government must continue to attempt to ensure that every hospital and clinic in the country have enough virus-testing kits, medicines, beds, respirators, ventilators, doctors, nurses and care givers at all times, it makes sense to approach COVID-19 from a national security perspective.

While not privy to the thinking process in the government, I recall vividly how other governments from past decades effectively applied security measures to defeat two armed insurgencies and the Indonesian-inspired confrontation. The Government does not need to reinvent wheels, it can use the same proven security architecture. With full support from the *rakyat* and some adaptation to the security mechanisms, together we can defeat COVID-19.

As we debate a solution, please spare a thought and for the doctors, nurses and other front liners (including those manning road blocks and on patrols) sacrificing comfort, family, health and life beyond the call of duty to ensure our safety. The front liners need to be regularly relieved of their duties before they burn out literally. We must find ways and means to lessen their physical and mental strain.

Recalling doctors, nurses and other medical practitioners from retirement to join the war against COVID-19 is commendable and will lessen the strain. However, the authorities and the private sector should join hand to compensate their effort by providing free accommodation, food and transport while on duty. Private clinics and private hospitals must do their national service too. Doctors who refuse to treat patients with the virus should be hauled up by the authorities. In time like this, saving life is more important than profit margins!!

For national sanity, safety and security, despite all the effort to encourage self-quarantine and social distancing were to fail, the entire nation must be locked down with immediate effect.

Some form of financial stimulus must be given to farmers and pharmacies to expand research and productivity. The poor and unemployed must receive some financial aid. A cash handout of RM1,000 would help the jobless affected by COVID-19.

Simple things like giving the *rakyat* free face masks on a regular and need basis, as in some countries, would go a long way in winning the trust of the people. Dispensing hand sanitizers and soap can improve basic hygiene.

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