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PM: Avoid being exposed to Coxsackie B virus

ISTANBUL, Mon: Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today advised the people to take appropriate measures to avoid being exposed to the Coxsackie B virus as the cause of the epidemic is not clear.

The virus has claimed the lives of 25 children in Sarawak since it was detected in Sibu on April 14.

He, however, said the situation had not worsened to the extent of closing schools temporarily to curb the spread of the disease as suggested by certain groups.

"We have not ascertained the cause of the disease as it is a rare illness and is not widespread," he told a news conference here.

Dr Mahathir is in Turkey to attend the inaugural summit of heads of government of the group of eight Islamic Developing Countries (D-8).

Two experts from Atlanta-based Centre of Disease Control and Prevention are now in Sarawak to determine the strain of virus which caused the deadly disease.

The virus attacked children aged between one and seven. The symptoms are high fever, breathing difficulties and vomiting.

As of midnight yesterday, 91 children were admitted at government hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia on suspicion of contracting the disease, an increase of 15 the day before.

Twenty-four are still being treated at the Kuala Lumpur Hospital while the other 27 at various hospitals nationwide.

The Health Ministry had advised parents not to take their children aged below seven to crowded public places besides ensuring personal hygiene when preparing food and drinks.

In Johor Baru, Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said the ministry will not close the Chinese primary schools in Kuching and Samarahan which recorded low attendance of pupils for fear of being infected by the virus.

"When we create fear, it will make it more difficult for us to handle the problem," he said when asked to comment on 55 Chinese primary schools in Kuching and Samarahan seeking the state education department's approval to close their Standard One to Three classes for two weeks in view of the poor attendance last week.

In Alor Star, Kedah Health Services director Datuk Dr Ahmad Tajuddin said that a two-year-old boy is being treated at the Kulim Hospital and another two-year-old boy at the Sungai Petani Hospital for suspected hand-mouth-foot disease.

In Penang, four children, aged between three and 11, are confirmed to have been infected with Coxsackie A virus and are now being hospitalised at Seberang Jaya and Bukit Mertajam hospitals.

State Health, Welfare and Caring Society Committee Chairman Dr K. Rajapathy said the victims - all boys - were admitted to the hospitals since last Wednesday.

In Kuching, the number of children admitted for suspected viral myocarditis infection has decreased, Sarawak Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Dr George Chan Hong Nam said.

"The number of children with serious case of viral myocarditis being treated at the wards has decreased to two, one each at the Sarawak General Hospital and Miri Hospital," he told reporters after attending the launch of the Sarawak Government Network (SarawakNet) by Chief Minister Tan Sri

Abdul Taib Mahmud.

Dr Chan, who was appointed by the state cabinet to coordinate efforts to contain the spread of the Coxsackie virus B, said that for the last two days there had been no reported deaths from the disease.

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