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Dr M: Centres to identify diseases a must

PETALING JAYA, Mon. - To ensure epidemics like Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) do not debilitate countries again, international centres dedicated to rapid identification of diseases must be set up.

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad today proposed the setting up of these centres, which he said were necessary to understand diseases, determine the remedy and develop vaccines quickly before they wreaked havoc on nations.

Screening travellers and checking their temperatures may not be enough, he said, due to the speed at which infectious diseases spread in this day and age of the modern air travel.

He said during SARS, whole countries were declared out of bounds and high costs were incurred to prevent a worldwide epidemic.

There was no guarantee that the next epidemic would not be more virulent and infectious, he added.

"A full-blown epidemic may be on our hands before we can even understand the disease and how it spreads, before a remedy is found.

"What is obvious is that the world is not equipped to deal with this possibility.

"The measures we have, such as quarantine, are clearly inadequate," he said in his keynote speech at the 5th Asia Pacific Travel Health Conference here.

He said the centres must consist of very well-equipped laboratories and be owned, financed and operated by the international community.

The centres should be manned by trained and competent personnel drawn from all over the world, he said, and a drill should be developed to enable personnel to spring into action as soon as there are reports of a possible unknown disease affecting travellers and ordinary people.

Dr Mahathir also said the staff must always wear protective suits and have special diagnostic and treatment of symptoms kit, so they could carry out physical and laboratory tests on the spot.

Full laboratory examinations should then be done using samples.

He said the centre should develop systems and drills to minimise risk of infection, and use the best methods of vaccine production.

There should be no intellectual property claims by anyone, he added.

"There can be no doubt that new diseases are going to make their appearances every now and again.

"Old diseases too might reappear in new forms and be resistant to drugs.

"Already we are seeing drug-resistant malaria and tuberculosis," he said.

Thus, setting up these centres would be money well spent, he said, as it would "be cheaper than handling a worldwide epidemic."

He said that this had to be an international project as poor countries, where new diseases were likely to appear, would not be able to set up and man the centres.

The project could be set up by an international organisation like the United Nations and financed by the countries of the world proportionately, he said.

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