

18/06/2003

Asean bolstering defences against future epidemics

PETALING JAYA, Tues. - With Asean more likely to be invaded by new microbes than a foreign army, it is bolstering its defences against any future epidemics such as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome.

Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said Asean had shown the political will to do so, and had an extensive work plan.

A flurry of activities and high-level meetings have been, and are being, held across the region on labour, transport, tourism, sharing of scientific information and health issues.

"The meetings have laid down very clear time-frames to set up a network and infrastructure to help Asean as a region to confront all future outbreaks," Chua said after presenting his keynote address at the first WHO Global SARS Conference today. The conference ends tomorrow.

"We are now looking beyond SARS and the present epidemic to future epidemics. We are now preparing for any new emerging microbes that may affect our countries."

He said Thailand would host a consultative meeting to strengthen the capacity of Asean+3 (Asean plus Japan, China and South Korea) countries in epidemiological surveillance and epidemiologists' training from June 24 to 26 in Bangkok.

Indonesia will prepare a work plan to improve the Asean disease surveillance net website and set up an Asean+3 SARS homepage to disseminate information on SARS, epidemiology, control and prevention with links to Asean+3 countries websites, Asean Secretariat and World Health Organisation.

"The work plan will be circulated to member countries for review by June 30."

He said the plan included strengthening the quality assurance of diagnostic laboratories for infectious disease control and surveillance within the region.

Malaysia will host a meeting of Asean+3 countries here on July 7 and 8 to strengthen the region's capacity to prevent and control not only SARS but also other new and emerging infectious diseases.

"Malaysia has been entrusted by the Asean+3 health ministers' meeting in Kuala Lumpur on April 26 to strengthen the capacity of the network of laboratories within Asean.

"The laboratories are very important for surveillance and to institute early warning systems."

Chua said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had in the recent stimulus package announced the setting up of an institute for technology and natural products to be headed by the Institute for Medical Research in BioValley.

"There will also be a Centre for Disease Control (CDC) in BioValley and a common user laboratory for the Health Ministry, IMR and other government agencies."

The Asean Secretariat will prepare the terms of reference for a long-term Asean+3 work plan, over and above the present action plan for SARS and other emerging or reemerging infectious diseases prevention and control.

This will be circulated to member countries for review.

Chua said the mission, endeavours and efforts undertaken in Asean had now borne fruits with Vietnam, the Philippines and Singapore exiting WHO's

affected countries' list.

Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia and Brunei have either no cases or very few imported ones.

"Asean is a SARS-free region."

Chua also briefly outlined how Malaysia handled the SARS situation after WHO issued a global alert on March 12, adding that there were only five probable cases and two deaths to date, and no local transmission.

On the SARS isolation wards nationwide, he said the ministry would maintain them with increased security to prevent the disease from spreading, if it occurred. They would be converted into normal wards during non-epidemic periods.

All government hospitals will have negative pressure isolation rooms to contain infectious diseases.

Chua said the Sungai Buloh Hospital, to be completed next year, would become the region's first centre for infectious diseases.