

**EXCHANGE OF VIEWS (INTERVENTION)
SPECIAL ASEAN COORDINATION COUNCIL MEETING ON COVID-19
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MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, MALAYSIA**

WISMA PUTRA, 9 APRIL 2020

Honourable Ministers,
Dear Colleagues,
Good morning,

On a personal basis, I would like to say thank you to everyone on your kind wishes. but I must admit – What a time this is for me to be appointed Foreign Minister – a Foreign Minister that is home-bound. It is a situation that I never expected to be in but your letters, messages, telephone calls and today's meeting has helped me and my team to settle in as fast as we can.

1. This morning's meeting could not be more important for us all. We cannot deny that ASEAN as a region has experienced an unprecedented era of peace and stability. But today, we are threatened by the emergence of an invisible enemy. We are at war with something we cannot see as Covid-19 has infected at least 15,477 people in Southeast Asia and claimed 527 lives in our region according to figures yesterday. Unfortunately, these numbers are still on the rise.
2. Today, it saddens me to report that Malaysia records the highest number of infections in the region with 4,119 confirmed positive as of yesterday. Given these numbers, my Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin announced a Movement Control Order (MCO) for the entire country last month on 16 March. It is not '*full lockdown*' but fundamentally, the MCO is a strict implementation of social distancing to limit the movement of people.
3. We are now in Phase 2 of Malaysia's MCO and are now focused on mass testing, rigorous contact tracing, and mandatory quarantine for returning citizens from abroad. Malaysia has also implemented Enhanced-MCOs in specific locations where a large cluster is detected. These Enhanced-MCO areas are fully locked down for 14 days, and residents and visitors are forbidden from entering or exiting the area. This enables the Government to conduct a thorough COVID-19 test towards all residents and curb the spread of the virus out of the areas.
4. While the full extent to which these measures prove effective remain uncertain, and whilst Malaysia is truly doing the best we can in the war against Covid-19, and while we as nations are prioritizing our domestic imperatives; Malaysia believes a comprehensive regional response from ASEAN is urgently needed in dealing with this pandemic.
5. I am aware that there are recommendations following the ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group on Public Health Emergencies (ACCWH-PHE) which we must deliberate and decide today. We must look ahead to implement joint strategies and for today's meeting, I would like to put forward three important elements which Malaysia feels we must embrace to win the war against Covid-19 :-
 - **Scale;**
 - **Speed; and**
 - **Solidarity.**
6. Regarding the first element, speed – I am happy to share that Malaysia has operationalised guidelines to provide emergency assistance to our ASEAN counterparts affected in other nations due to Covid-19. Brunei has helped bring back our stranded Malaysians from Egypt, and we have done the same for Singapore and Indonesia from Iran and Nepal. True to the spirit of ASEAN, we are thankful for the assistance rendered to us and we hope this cooperation will

continue in future emergencies.

7. *Speed* also plays an important role in challenging fake news and rumours that thrive on fear and uncertainty. Fake news during this pandemic has revealed our society's susceptibility to the influence of misinformation and disinformation. As movement controls become the new normal, this means more people are spending time indoors and online which highlights the need for us to be quick in our responses. Worse still, and my biggest fear, it could affect bilateral relations between nations and hijack ASEAN's agenda based on shared principles and values.
8. For example, recently an NGO in Indonesia, alleged that Malaysia is deporting Indonesian nationals due to our Movement Control Order. Thanks to the close relationship between Ibu Retno and myself, combined with a swift response by Indonesia's Foreign Ministry, Indonesia's Embassy in Kuala Lumpur and us in Wisma Putra – this was quickly diffused. Between ASEAN, we must jointly pledge to combat fraud and misinformation in real-time to prevent something like this from recurring. This is something we have to continuously monitor and respond effectively.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

9. On the second element of scale – Malaysia, in principle, agrees with the proposal to establish the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) ASEAN Response Fund which will utilize part of the existing ASEAN Development Fund (ADF). Malaysia commends Thailand's effort in preparing the Concept Note to operationalize this fund as soon as possible.
10. I agree that we in ASEAN have successfully stepped up efforts against natural disasters but moving forward, Malaysia is of the view that we must prioritise the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund to expand the scale of existing emergency stockpiles for pandemic responses with items such as face masks, test kits and protective equipments. I understand there are shortages globally, but we must be prepared for any eventuality. In addition, by expanding the mandate given to the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) to enable it to respond on public health emergencies, Malaysia is of the view that it must not duplicate with existing mechanisms.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

11. Indeed, many of our countries have focused on drastic measures due to the worsening of the pandemic in our region. Nevertheless, as threat severity varies from country to country – governments and people have responded differently to the threat. But it is important for us to be well informed and share with each other what our Governments are doing for us to formulate a regional synergy – leveraging on each nation's unique capabilities to ensure the safety and security of our people. This is the all-important third element, solidarity. Interdependence and unity is the order of the day
12. I am proud to report that the Malaysian-led ASEAN Emergency Operation Centre Network for Public Health Emergencies (ASEAN EOC Network) has circulated daily situational updates and information on prevention, detection and response measures, complemented by real-time information sharing on confirmed cases and cross-border infections. Secondly, the ASEAN Risk Assessment and Risk Communication Centre (ARARC) hosted by Malaysia has played an important role in disseminating prevention and control measures, including preparedness and capacity building programmes.
13. However, we need to expand what it truly means to share '*best experiences*'. This is a multi-pronged approach where context can be placed in medical equipment such as the type of test kits and ventilators used; or the economy where targeted subsidies and cash handouts may work for some of us but not all; or movement restrictions which varies from full lockdowns to partial restrictions. We must avoid the risk of nations missing out on crucial information, policy coordination and strategic options undertaken by another ASEAN member state.

Your Excellencies,

14. I understand, there is no one formula that will work for all 10 nations in ASEAN but, there must be a unique approach to combat this pandemic for the benefit of more than 600 million people. Our approach on mass-testing with PCR Test Kits; and our 3 stimulus packages jointly worth 64.9 Billion USD to boost our economy may work for us in Malaysia but may not work for ASEAN. But as a region, we must unite and persevere to jointly defeat Covid-19 instead of working as nations alone. I am a strong believer that in every crisis lies an opportunity and if we are to succeed, we can and must emerge as a strong and relevant regional organization worldwide.
15. In pursuing a more active and integrated cooperation mechanism, we must jointly develop a post-pandemic recovery plan within ASEAN. A haphazard response will only threaten our regional grouping. We have an opportunity to act here and it is never too early to look ahead. With movement restrictions and travel bans, the Covid-19 pandemic has proven to be the greatest threat to ASEAN's spirit of connectivity. Collectively, as a group representing more than 600 million people – we must work together and aim for ASEAN to be a complete zero-Covid-19 region. We must show the world that we have the resolve and political will to help our people in this pandemic.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

16. Indeed, this increasingly complex setting requires new dynamic models, and crisis-proofing ASEAN must be our top priority. We must realise that our resilience to Covid-19 is only as strong as our weakest link and the only thing we are certain of for now, is that our future remains uncertain. We in ASEAN must continue to make sure that we speak with a unified voice and expand the scope of our cooperation with speed, scale and solidarity, so as to not lose our relevance and centrality.
17. The fate of more than 600 million people lies on our shoulders. Yes, this is a heavy burden to carry but I believe, with our collective strengths – we can achieve a better and brighter future for our countries and ASEAN. God willing.

Thank you.