

INTERVENTION (EXCHANGE OF VIEWS) DURING THE SPECIAL ASEAN-US FOREIGN MINISTERS' MEETING ON COVID-19 BY YB DATO' SERI HISHAMMUDDIN TUN HUSSEIN MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS MALAYSIA, WISMA PUTRA, 23 APRIL 2020

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Your Excellency Saleumxay Kommasith, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Lao PDR, Your Excellency Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State for the United States of America, My fellow ASEAN colleagues,
Good morning.

Today I will neither be focusing on face masks or PPEs; nor will I deliberate about test kits. I am sure we have all heard this time and time again over the past few months. What I would like to touch upon though are the larger, unseen challenges that we are facing on top of a health crisis. Our nations are navigating uncharted waters and to win the war on Covid-19, Malaysia believes, is not just about low numbers or flattening the curve. In fact, it requires innovative and whole-of-society solutions as this goes beyond just treating the infected.

Since the last time we, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers, met and discussed virtually – Malaysia embarked on a new journey to maneuver through these difficult times. Over the past few weeks, we have placed a greater focus on the future of our country and the survival of our people. While our health institutions are still very much focused on battling Covid-19 head on, we have tried and begun to balance that with other focus areas, namely :-

1. Healthcare;
2. Economy;
3. Food Security
4. Education; and
5. Social Systems;

Your Excellencies,

On the **healthcare** front - Malaysia now has 5,532 recorded cases, with 3,452 recovered; combined with a mortality rate of only 1.6%. Just one month ago on 26 March, we were faced with a peak of 235 new cases recorded in a single day, the highest Malaysia has ever experienced. Today, I am proud that we have recorded only double-digit new cases for 5 days in a row. I admit, these numbers look promising, but a full victory goes beyond just focusing on the statistics.

Initially, we were very much focused on controlling the spread of the coronavirus amongst the population, breaking the chain of infections through immediate investments in our healthcare system; and sourcing equipment and best practices from abroad. Following that, we then moved on to focus on the financial side of things.

On the **economic** front – Malaysia has put in place 3 Economic Stimulus Packages worth a combined 64.6 USD Billion, which is 18.1% of our GDP. We hope that these stimulus packages will assist those in the Bottom 40 and Middle 40 of the population; and, our Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) which make up a large part of our economy. This is to give a

direct boost to people on the ground, ensuring cash is directly channeled to those affected by the Movement Control Order (MCO) imposed.

Your Excellencies,

On the **food security** front - with a population of over 30 million people in the nation, ensuring everyone has food on the table is admittedly not an easy task. The Government took a proactive step in ensuring certain economic sectors remained open during our MCO, and also established a Food Security Fund. But Malaysia is fortunate, as of today we still have ample essential food supplies for our people.

However, as we know, when supply outweighs demand – a surplus will exist. In normal times, our food surplus will be exported to foreign markets in order to ensure there is no wastages. But during these unprecedented times, markets are closed with no definite time frame to when the global economy will be back to where it was before Covid-19.

I spoke about this matter to my counterparts Ibu Retno of Indonesia, and His Excellency Don of Thailand, and found that we are all facing similar situations. On that note, Malaysia would like to propose that we in ASEAN formulate a mechanism to provide our surplus food to nations around the world who are facing food shortages. I believe, the potential success from this initiative would not only reignite trade from ASEAN to the world; but also benefit the income of our farmers, breeders and fishermen in the region.

Your Excellencies,

On the **education** front, Malaysia has closed all our schools indefinitely, postponing exams and pushing for online learning from home for our children. Students have not gone to schools for more than 4 weeks and this change in our education policy is quickly being embraced by our people as the new normal. Furthermore, we are also aware that we have children furthering their studies in countries abroad.

In the United States for example, we have over 6,700 Malaysian students who are, at the moment, unsure of what their future brings. Parents are getting worried, and the students themselves are in a dilemma of whether they will be able to sit their exams or even graduate. And I am sure this is not just faced by Malaysia alone – there must be thousands, if not millions, of ASEAN citizens abroad facing similar situations.

My dear colleagues, I understand that these are exceptional times which require exceptional measures, and we as nations must come together to ensure our people remain strong and steadfast through this crisis. This pandemic has not only threatened the lives of the more than 600 million people in ASEAN, but also threatens to tear the very fabric our society apart.

Your Excellencies,

Most importantly is how Covid-19 has affected us on the **social** front. We are all, in one way or another, facing varying levels of restricted movements in our countries. Malaysia has imposed our MCO, fundamentally a strict enforcement of social distancing – but the dilemma now lies in what will happen if we lift the MCO. As humans, we are inherently social beings. Undoubtedly, these restrictions have social ramifications, affecting the ability of our society to bond, communicate and maintain relationships. So the question lies - *how long can our people essentially stay at home and avoid social contact?* We are after all interconnected, and dependent on each other.

For us in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and for Muslims in ASEAN, tomorrow marks the start of the holy month of Ramadhan. A month where we get together socially, break fast with our families, and congregate in prayer. But this year, we have to ensure religious traditions are adhered to while enforcing restrictions on social gatherings. Worse still, are the less fortunate who have to welcome the month of Ramadhan without the good deeds of those who donate money and deliver food. *How will we as nations balance our cultural norms with the existence of social restrictions?*

Your Excellencies,

These are real problems we must address and solve above and beyond the health aspect of Covid-19. This pandemic is much more than test kits and anti-malaria drugs. This is a global crisis that will forever affect how we live as societies. Even if we manage to find the answers to all the issues I have mentioned, nothing will truly be solved until we find the **medication to treat** and the **vaccine to prevent** Covid-19 from ravaging our people.

Our generation has never faced something on this scale, and this is where we must come together to ensure we combine our collective strengths to stop this pandemic and mitigate its impact on our society. The urgency for us as nations to save lives is paramount and cooperation is key. For us as ASEAN and the United States, finding a vaccine must be our top priority.

Developing a cure is the only way we can win the war against Covid-19 and move forward to resuming our lives to some semblance of normalcy. As leaders, we must be courageous and sincere in our efforts to work together for the benefit our people. Just to state a fact, today's video conference where Secretary Pompeo has dedicated time, even while facing his own crisis in the United States, underscores our strength as a regional bloc to solve the problem together.

I am confident that with this partnership between ASEAN and the US, we can, and will overcome this together. As my Prime Minister said last week, we must expand our scope of cooperation with solidarity, vision and leadership.

Thank you.