

Intervention**SPECIAL ASEAN-RUSSIA FOREIGN MINISTERS' MEETING ON COVID-19**

YB Dato' Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein
Minister of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia

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Her Excellency Ibu Retno L.P. Marsudi,
Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Republic of Indonesia,

His Excellency Sergey Lavrov,
Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Russian Federation,

My fellow ASEAN Colleagues,

1. Firstly, I'd like to begin by thanking Her Excellency Ibu Retno Marsudi and His Excellency Sergey Lavrov for co-chairing this virtual meeting on Covid-19 which could not have come at a more appropriate time. Covid-19 as we all know has affected nations across the globe. Given the extraordinary nature of this pandemic, many of us worked without a rulebook – there was no *'one solution fits all'* that we as nations could embrace. Initially, we were forced as Governments to make tough decisions regarding 'lockdowns', closing schools and enforcing curfews which affected businesses and the livelihoods of our people. We knew jobs and incomes would be lost and children would not have gone to schools.

2. On Malaysia's part, we took a tough decision to place the entire nation under a Movement Control Order (MCO), fundamentally a strict enforcement of social distancing. Fortunately, our people have embraced this 'new normal' since the 18th of March and are currently in the 3rd Phase of Recovery following the Conditional MCO which ended last week. As an update to my fellow ASEAN colleagues since the last time we met on 23rd April, our economic sectors are now opening up, but our people are still restricted from travelling abroad for tourism to ensure a stringent control on import cases. Fortunately, Malaysia has gone beyond face masks, ventilators and hospital beds; from being the highest recorded number of cases in ASEAN a few months ago to having only recorded single digit increases in the past few days. The valiant efforts of our frontliners and the discipline of our Malaysian people facing these unprecedented times must be given credit for the success of our national strategies. I believe we are on the right path, but we will never be complacent.

Your Excellencies,

3. We must also never forget that this pandemic is combination of a health and economic crisis. In a matter of months, the highly contagious disease has slowed global commerce to a crawl, pushing the world to the brink of a severe recession.

4. Our priority must always be to our people and their livelihoods which have been the most affected during this crisis. Malaysia took a proactive approach of introducing 4 economic stimulus packages thus far, jointly worth USD 70 Billion which is roughly 20% of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP), focusing on minimizing job losses, protecting incomes and ensuring the people have enough to live by. Our peoplecentric stimulus packages' focal point is simply to not leave anyone behind. As these prudently implemented economic revitalisations provide a much-needed boost to secure the economic sustainability of Malaysia, we must always ensure that it does not jeopardise our efforts to break the chain of transmissions within the nation.

Your Excellencies,

5. We are now at a point where the playing field between nations has been levelled. Covid-19 wreaked havoc to all in its path and no country, large or small, rich or poor, was spared. This places smaller nations on par with larger nations. A perfect example would be us in ASEAN – where 10 nations have come together, working tirelessly notwithstanding the geopolitics of strategic security issues and previous crises, to overcome and survive this pandemic. Malaysia believes the ASEAN way will get us through this once again.

6. Today, we're here to discuss on how ASEAN and Russia, both partners in stability, peace and prosperity, can share a common goal and pull our strengths together to battle the Covid-19 pandemic to ensure we emerge stronger from this crisis. Previously, our engagements with Russia focused heavily on security matters and the geopolitics of the region but this relationship must evolve due to the pandemic. Covid-19 as we know affects a wide range of sectors such as healthcare, the economy and education.

7. On that note, I would like to thank HE Sergey Lavrov and the Government of Russia for facilitating 238 Malaysians to return at a time when borders remain closed and international travel severely disrupted. Malaysia is grateful that our constructive coordination has enabled our nationals to come home. However, we in ASEAN must have thousands of our nationals in Russia facing similar issues. Malaysia would like to propose Russia continue supporting and working closely with our Embassies in Russia to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our students there. It would mean a lot to their parents, working closely with our Embassies to connect with our children in a foreign land via a simple phone call would mean a lot to their parents and me personally.

Your Excellencies,

8. That is just one immediate action that Russia can take in engaging ASEAN, but in these times of difficulty – larger collective action is needed for the benefit of our people. We need to put in place concrete action items that will be followed through immediately, without the need for another Video Conference or another Summit in the future. We must take the opportunity that Russia is now willing to engage us as a bloc as a sign of positivity. By engaging ASEAN, this fares well for ASEAN-Russia relations moving forward.

9. On that note, I would like to propose two immediate takeaways for ASEAN and Russia today which are :-

- the development of a Covid-19 **Vaccine**; and

- a comprehensive **Economic Recovery Plan**.

Your Excellencies,

10. As we are all now deliberating over plans to get our countries back on track, we must realise that the threat of another wave of infections is highly probable without a **vaccine** to prevent this deadly coronavirus. For now, we may have successes in treating those infected with Covid-19 in our region, but a vaccine is sorely needed.

11. However moving forward, collaboration in the research and development of a vaccine must be prioritized for ASEAN and Russia to ensure lives can be saved. While progress on the development of a vaccine has been encouraging, we must ensure that when the time comes – the vaccine must be available, accessible and equitably shared for all. Research has estimated that around 85 to 90 percent of our populations will need to be vaccinated for us to break free from the pandemic and for normalcy to return.

12. Furthermore, we must ensure the manufacturing of the vaccine promotes international collaboration rather than nationalistic competition. I cannot stress this enough – this is about saving lives rather than national pride for the highest bidder. This pandemic has made it brutally clear that a vaccine will not only save lives and prevent Covid-19 from infecting more, they are also essential in helping to maintain global security, social cohesion and economic stability for our nations. Malaysia also welcomes Russia's willingness to contribute to the regional reserve of medical supplies which ASEAN is developing.

Your Excellencies,

13. This brings me to my second point – a comprehensive **Economic Recovery Plan**. We in ASEAN are currently developing an ASEAN Economic Recovery Plan focusing not only on the financial aspects of our economy, but also on social welfare safety nets, food security and education for all. However, in an increasingly globalized world, the fate of our economies is intertwined with one another.

14. With a population of over 650 million people, a combined GDP of USD 2.8 trillion, and a critical hub for global trade with over USD 3.4 trillion in global trade transits through the ASEAN region each year, ASEAN's impact on global economy and trade must not be ignored. A few of us have shown positive strides in battling Covid-19 and have already publicly mentioned the potential of travel bubbles between 'Green Nations' and I believe this will be the best way forward to kickstart our regional economy.

15. Moving forward, Russia and ASEAN must remain committed in preserving and maintaining open and connected supply chains by working closely to identify and address trade disruptions that will not affect the flow of necessities. I would also like to express our appreciation to Russia for its willingness to contribute to the Covid-19 ASEAN Response Fund through the utilization of the ASEAN-Russia Dialogue Partnership Fund.

Your Excellencies,

16. This is not the time for us to be selfish, this is the time for us to be united in our common struggle against a common threat – a dangerous and invisible enemy that threatens our way of life. If Covid-19 is not dealt with responsibly and collectively, it will destroy all the good we have worked hard for. The burden is on our shoulders, but I believe, with perseverance and honesty, we will rise to the challenge and defeat Covid-19 once and for all.

Thank you.