

No intention to malign Health DG, says Tiong

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Bintulu MP Tiong King Sing said he did not intend to “maliciously target” Health Ministry director-general Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah by accusing him of being “afraid to die”.

In a statement today, Tiong said he meant to highlight people’s dissatisfaction with shortcomings in the government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

He said the Health Ministry should have acted more decisively in containing the spread of the disease, and again questioned the director-general for supposedly not inspecting the situation in Sabah personally to prescribe the right course of action.

“Many have wondered why the director-general cannot himself visit the pandemic areas to give a first-hand report on the actual situation to the National Security Council and prime minister as soon as possible.

“Instead of holding those daily press conferences, he should focus entirely on the pandemic prevention work and hand over giving daily updates to the senior minister for defence,” he said in a statement today.

Earlier today, the MP from the Progressive Democratic Party sparked an uproar in the Dewan Rakyat during the debate on the Budget 2021 proposal by insinuating that Noor Hisham did not visit Sabah to monitor the Covid-19 situation there because he was afraid of dying.

Noor Hisham countered that he had visited Sabah in late-August to oversee the Health Ministry’s preparations ahead of the Sabah state election in September.

A fortnight ago, his deputy Dr Chong Chee Keong had gone with the prime minister’s public health advisor Dr Jemilah Mahmood to inspect the Covid-19 response in the state, he said.

“As a Muslim, I have accepted that death can happen anywhere. What is important for us is our intention, which is to carry out our duties and break the chain of infection,” he added.

Tiong’s explanation of his remarks in parliament is reproduced in full as follows:

People are the final victims of delays and negligence in Covid-19 control

I reiterate once again that, during the debate of the Supply Bill 2021 in parliament today, I did not intend to maliciously target Health Ministry director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah. Rather, my words reflect the frustrations of the frontliners and the people for the past several months. DAP MPs such as RSN Rayer should not take advantage of my words for cheap publicity in the guise of “defending civil servants”.

My statement was not malicious. We all know that civil servants do not have it easy. They are all working hard for the country and its people, but shortcomings must be identified and improved.

As an elected representative, there is no reason why I cannot truthfully convey the grassroots’ dissatisfaction and bring constructive criticism to the table. It is clear to all that the pandemic is getting out of control.

It is the people who are in dire straits. Our first consideration must be what is actually happening to the people, instead of just doing something for its own sake.

I will assert again that there have human errors which led to negligence in the

prevention and control of the pandemic. For high-ranking civil servants, it is even more crucial to ensure that all decisions and prevention best practices hinge on the best interests for the well-being of the people and the country's macro-economy.

Take the outbreaks in Sabah as an example. As early as October, once a cluster was identified, the affected area should have been decisively cordoned off, with mass screenings carried out immediately, rather than allowing potential carriers to wander around. After all, as many affected patients are asymptomatic, an immediate blockade was all the more necessary.

When the first cases were detected in Qingdao, China in mid-October, the authorities there were able to complete more than one million nucleic acid tests within days, thereby seizing upon a critical window of opportunity to decisively manage the pandemic.

Malaysia, even without the human resources of the scale of China, should have been able to take similar decisive measures immediately. The area of lockdown would likely need not be as large, and the manpower need will be relatively small. China's area and population are significantly larger than Malaysia's.

If China could do it, there is no reason why Malaysia cannot. In response to the

pandemic, the government had previously allocated billions of ringgit to fight the pandemic. Couldn't a part of these funds be used for large scale testing?

When Sabah was facing the outbreaks, it was even plagued by a serious shortage of medical supplies, including personal protective equipment like protective suits, eye masks, facemasks, sanitisers and others.

Why didn't the health director-general personally go down to the ground to inspect the situation for himself and "prescribe" the right measures for the situation?

Many have wondered why the director-general cannot himself visit the pandemic areas to give a first-hand report on the actual situation to the National Security Council and prime minister as soon as possible.

Instead of holding those daily press conferences, he should focus entirely on the pandemic prevention work and hand over giving daily updates to the senior minister for defence.

While public opinion was strongly condemning the Sabah election for the outbreak, new clusters had also sprung from Kedah, Penang, and Selangor. How can this be explained? The health director-general should be aware that it takes a

first-hand knowledge of the pandemic to understand fully.

What is the problem? Several clusters have been identified, but these were not decisively contained, particularly the situation in Selangor. New cases have even crossed into Negeri Sembilan. This does not reflect decisive action but a consequence of losing control.

With the pandemic getting out of control, if this does not rest on the shoulders of the director-general, why should he be the one to hold a press conference every day?

At the end of the day, we all want to see more effective responses to the pandemic with a clear understanding of the frontlines. And how many labs have been established to conduct in-depth research into the coronavirus?

With this trend continuing, how will the country and economy recover?

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