

MCO relaxation: Are authorities on the same page?

Malaysiakini

11 December 2020

Hariz Mohd

Seemingly contradictory messaging from official channels about codes of conduct during the pandemic may indicate that the authorities are not entirely on the same page on the relaxation of movement control orders.

One clear indicator is the relaxation of bans on gatherings, which are now allowed in all states and territories except Sabah, most of Selangor and pockets of other states.

According to the National Security Council guidelines for states under the recovery movement control order (MCO) released on Dec 7, social gatherings are allowed on condition that there is social distancing among guests.

However, issuing a warning against such gatherings, Health director-general Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah yesterday urged the people to be careful.

Listing out clusters which originated from gatherings, he noted that many gatherings do not follow set SOPs.

Health director-general Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah

"Take for example the Enggor cluster in Perak, and the Indah Mas cluster in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, which both started with a family gathering and then spread to the community," Noor Hisham said.

The Inai and Jambul clusters in Sabah started at a social event while the Mentari cluster in Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Kuala Lumpur was started from a religious event involving close family members and friends who attended a funeral in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, he said.

All these clusters happened during the conditional MCO, when gatherings were banned.

"Physical distancing is hard in places which are crowded and cramped, and we must learn from these clusters," Noor Hisham stressed.

Today, although gatherings are barred in areas under conditional MCO, residents can easily travel across the border to attend gatherings there.

Genting Highlands and Janda Baik in Pahang, for example, can be within an hour's drive from downtown Kuala Lumpur.

These two popular weekend holiday destinations for Klang Valley residents are in the district of Bentong, which is experiencing a spike in Covid-19 cases.

Its biggest cluster, Jalan Genting, was traced to an individual in Titiwangsa, Kuala Lumpur.

Last Saturday, Defence Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob cited the need to revive the country's economy as the key reason for the new SOPs, which include lifting of travel restrictions, except for locations placed under enhanced MCO.

"It is projected that the country's GDP will sustain RM300 million losses a day if the conditional MCO continues to be implemented," Ismai saidl.

Read more: [CMCO 3.0 \(Dec 9\): New guidelines, what you can and can't do](#)

However, the lifting of travel bans is seemingly contradictory to what the health authorities had been preaching about protecting Covid-19 green zones.

Freedom to travel inter-district and interstate means those from areas that

record larger numbers of positive cases in conditional MCO states can travel to localities which are relatively Covid-19 free.

Just last month, Noor Hisham had said that the conditional MCO, which limits movements, was something that is needed to protect the green zones.

"We want to limit cross-border, cross-state and even cross-district movements, so this is our approach. We need to protect the green states, for example, Perlis, Pahang and Kelantan," he told the media on Nov 9.

This was not only time Noor Hisham reminded the public of the importance to protect the clean areas. He had also told those in the urban areas, where the outbreak is rife, to avoid returning to their hometown and risk infecting their loved ones.

'Follow sunnah - stay at home'

At a press conference on Wednesday, Noor Hisham advised the public to follow SOPs when they travel. While people can travel, he said it was also important not to let themselves be exposed to positive Covid-19 cases.

The ministry is also monitoring the impact of the relaxation. Noor Hisham said if

the number of positive cases shoots up beyond expectations, the authorities would need to rethink the strategy.

In another round of reminders, yesterday morning, he posted on Facebook a series of advice from the Islamic perspective, on conduct during the time of the pandemic.

"Travel ban is a prophetic teaching," he wrote, citing a hadith from Prophet Muhammad ordering Muslims not to travel into a land that has an outbreak, and for those inside not to leave the area.

"Staying home is a prophetic teaching," said another point in the posting.

To add to the mixed messaging, the National Security Council had also advised the people to stay at home if they have nothing important to do outside.

Yet, two days earlier, the same page published the new SOPs which allow sports, social and recreational activities in areas under the recovery MCO.

'We could only advise'

Meanwhile, highly placed sources told Malaysiakini that there were instances

when decisions during the pandemic were made, but not in accordance with the Health Ministry's recommendations.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, the source, however, declined to elaborate further what these decisions were, saying "The power is not ours to make decisions."

Malaysiakini was told that health officials are monitoring the daily positive numbers warily, especially for the Klang Valley.

However, easing of travel restrictions was only one of the things that they are concerned about.

One of the sources said that the situation in the Klang Valley could become worse than it was in Sabah if four main factors are not tackled.

These are the spread of Covid-19 among undocumented migrants; living and working conditions of the foreign workers; an outbreak in detention facilities, including prisons; and members of the public not following SOPs.

Sabah had three of the factors at one go, said a Health Ministry source. The only thing that did not contribute to the surge in cases there was the spread of the

virus among documented foreign workers.

"However, in the Klang Valley, we might have all four. And if this happens, then we would see the numbers mencanak (skyrocket).

"This needs a joint effort by all the related agencies to address," said the source, adding that the people also have to play their role.

Previously, Noor Hisham had expressed concern on the daily surge in positive cases, saying that it would overwhelm and affect the ministry's capability to conduct public health activities.

The Health Ministry has 147 hospitals nationwide, 45 of which treat Covid-19 patients. They also have quarantine centres that cumulatively provide 14,754 beds for positive patients who are asymptomatic or only show mild symptoms of the coronavirus.

Touching on measures that should be taken now, given the new SOPs, sources suggested that the government should be quicker in imposing an enhanced MCO on localities that record a high number of cases.

"Whenever cases start rising, we must impose an enhanced MCO on the location

to prevent the virus from spreading further," said a source.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd

Source: <https://www.malysiakini.com/news/554752>