

PM played key role, says Health DG

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He trusted civil servants and did what was needed to contain pandemic

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PETALING JAYA: A Prime Minister who listened and a trusting nation made it possible for Malaysia to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, says Health director-general Datuk Noor Hisham Abdullah (pic).

He also said authorities had earned the public's trust with continuous engagement, including daily live briefings, and this allowed an all-out effort to be put in place to contain the outbreak.

"We prepared for the worst and we hoped for the best.

"We had a political turmoil for two weeks (in February) where we did not have a government but we continued to do what we do best – to keep the public informed about the pandemic.

"When the new Prime Minister (Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin) came, we told him that we need to lock down the whole country and he listened to us and trusted the civil servants. Because of that, the implementation of movement control order (MCO) on March 18 took place," he said while co-hosting a webinar meeting with Kerala

Health Minister KK Shailaja yesterday.

The event was organised by the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative (DNDi).

The webinar titled "Covid-19: What can Malaysia and Kerala, India teach the rest of the world?" was moderated by Prof Madhukar Pai.

Prof Madhukar is currently the Canada Research Chair in Epidemiology & Global Health at McGill University and Director at McGill International TB Centre.

Dr Noor Hisham further noted that early preparation and past experience managing SARS and the Nipah virus, were vital for the health experts to collate data in their fight against the Covid-19 pandemic.

He also elaborated on the various types of preparation at health facilities and quarantine stations as the country dealt with the first wave of Covid-19 cases.

"We realised in a war, we need to identify the virus or it will be difficult to go down to the field. We trained our experts," said Dr



Noor Hisham.

He said preparations started months before the MCO and the health ministry decided to activate their efforts in January itself when they first heard from Chinese authorities about Covid-19.

"All positive cases were admitted to hospital and those exposed put in quarantine.

"We had 40 hospitals to treat Covid-19. Our first wave was between Jan 25 to early February involving tourists from Wuhan and then we had 11 days of no cases – this was the calm before the storm.

"We realised Malaysians were returning from overseas and school holidays were around the corner.

"We then went into lockdown," said Dr Noor Hisham.

He also revealed that the daily meetings between ministries for the past three months under the National Security Council during the MCO period were filled with "a lot of arguments".

"Every morning, we hold ministerial meetings and then we had inter-ministry meetings for



three months.

"There were lots of arguments and they (ministers) want to open up more sectors. I would say no because how can you open up when the virus is still not under control?

"Amicably we would come up with a solution.

"Whatever we did, we engaged with other ministries. We acted based on evidence, not based on politics. Facts and science and not rumours. Whatever we did, it was evidence-based," said Dr Noor Hisham.

Shailaja also said that the Kerala health ministry had worked in coordination with the Kerala state gov-

ernment to contain the pandemic.

She, however, said her worry was because most of the state residents were returning from around the world.

She explained how public education, information along with lockdown and cluster management strategies worked in containing the Covid-19 pandemic in the state.

"We had past experiences with the Nipah virus and we then learnt how to isolate patients and do contact tracing.

"We quickly formed rapid response teams and financial preparations.

"Now, state borders are open and we are watching closely," said Shailaja, who congratulated Malaysia for managing to control the pandemic.

The webinar ended with both Dr Noor Hisham and Shailaja agreeing that the war against the Covid-19 is far from over.

Malaysia has been hailed by the World Health Organisation as one of the more successful countries in dealing with Covid-19 while Kerala has been hailed as the most successful state to have contained the pandemic in India.