

Time for a radical rethink

PM: Life-saving drugs should be defined by public good and not patent rights

KUALA LUMPUR: Asia should lead the way in opening up patent protections to produce cheaper generic versions of life-saving medicines for critical diseases, from Covid-19 to HIV/AIDS, says Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

Welcoming the US President Joe Biden administration's stated intention to support the temporary waiver of intellectual property (IP) protection for Covid-19 vaccines, he said this should give way to a total transformation of the pharmaceutical patent system.

"Pausing the gears is not enough. Our obligation is to dismantle it entirely," he said in a video address to Nikkei's Future of Asia conference in Tokyo yesterday.

Muhyiddin said based on the United Nations' Article 25(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it was high time for these innovations including drugs, vaccines and medical devices to be brought out of the purview of individual patent rights and for global property rights to be created instead.

For Asia to effectively prevent and fight pandemics, he said, it needed to shift from a purely nationalistic approach to health services to investing in health as a



Global protection: Muhyiddin speaking on vaccine cooperation at the Nikkei's Future of Asia conference in Tokyo. — Bernama

global public good.

"Treating health infrastructure as a global public good would mean Asia as a whole treats health the way many individual countries treat their education, security and the environment.

"In essence, as a critical piece of the global commons supported by a collective investment, for the benefit of all," he said.

These countries have more than enough vaccine doses to immunise people beyond their own populations," said Muhyiddin.

He pointed out that 20% or 252 million out of 1.23 billion doses administered across 174 countries so far were taken up by the United States alone.

In terms of production, he said, China and India had exported around 200 million and 66 million vaccine doses, about 48% and 34% of their total production respectively.

"In comparison, the United States and the United Kingdom have only exported three million and one million of their vaccine doses respectively, or a mere 1.1% and 4% of their total production respectively," he said.

Muhyiddin also said the failure of global leadership to address the pandemic was due to human biases such as tribalism, dysfunctional competition and short-term thinking.

"Of course, it is unrealistic to expect nations not to compete, or for them to forgo building their self-interest, but we must also realise that long-term victory often doesn't mean pushing your country ahead of the line all the

time, every time.

"Certainly, one posits that, in the post-Covid-19 world, it will be the countries which are most generous, which build bridges rather than walls, and which bring their neighbours together rather than drive them away, which will be successful," he added.

He also said success depended on whether Asian regional institutions could strengthen themselves with more robust conflict management mechanisms and move towards a flexible view of state sovereignty.

He said by demonstrating the ability to share leadership with the region's weaker states in managing its security and economic conflicts, Asia's emerging powers could gain global credibility and trust, and this could facilitate a substantive contribution to global governance from a position of leadership and strength.

Muhyiddin said Malaysia also pledged its best efforts to break the bonds of pandemic misery, to cut the chains of poverty, and for the relief of people affected by tyranny.

"We have to help in every way we can, not because we want their commerce, not because we seek to extend our geo-political influences, but because it is the right and moral thing to do," he said. — Bernama