

Muhyiddin: Any delay in reopening borders will cost us

By JUNAID IBRAHIM
newsdesk@thestar.com.my

PUTRAJAYA: The National Recovery Council (NRC) is pushing for a quick reopening of Malaysia's borders, saying that a delay would impact the country.

"The faster we can reopen, the better," said its chairman Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

Any delay, he said, would have a huge impact on the country, especially in terms of the economy.

"If we are late in opening the country even by a day, we will have to bear great costs," he added.

He said the council had been told that the Health Ministry was finalising the standard operating procedure for reopening borders to be approved by the Cabinet.

This would be announced by the government soon, he told a press conference after chairing the third NRC meeting here yesterday.

He said despite the current surge in Covid-19 cases, the healthcare system was still capable of handling the situation.

"If the Health Ministry can handle it, there should be no problem (in reopening borders)," he added.

He also said the tourism sector relied heavily on foreign visitors, which had contributed RM80bil in revenue before the pandemic.

Hence, he said a prompt reopening of borders was important.

The NRC had earlier recommended that the country's borders be reopened for quarantine-free travel by March 1.

Muhyiddin said reopening the

borders was important to revive the country's economy, especially the business and tourism sectors, adding that he hoped Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob would agree to the NRC's proposal to do so by March 1.

On Feb 18, Ismail Sabri said the Health Ministry had been given two to three weeks to present proposals and a border-reopening SOP to the Cabinet.

Muhyiddin also said the country's recovery from the impact of the pandemic had shown progress as the gross domestic product (GDP) recorded a rise of 3.1% last year.

He said the country's transition to Phase Four of the National Recovery Plan (NRP) and the safe reopening of the economic sector had contributed to the improvement.

"The transition of the country to Phase Four also contributed to the reduction of the unemployment rate to 4.2%.

"The reopening of the economic sector led to external trade reaching RM2 trillion with the gross value of foreign direct investment exceeding RM50 billion," he added.

But he said the nation's overall sectoral performance was still below the pre-pandemic levels of 2019.

"Critical sub-sectors such as the accommodation sector and the food and beverages sector are still below the performance of 2019.

"The second NRP will be crucial in ensuring the strategic recovery of affected sectors," he said.

The NRC meeting in Putrajaya, which was attended by the ministers of Health and Works, as well as

council members, also discussed NRP 2.0 and the council's action items for this year.

"I would like to inform everyone that NRP 2.0 will be completed soon for the government to review," Muhyiddin said.

He added that the NRC had considered proposals by the British Malaysian Chamber of Commerce in the development, recruitment and retention of talents to attract more foreign investment.

"The proposals would help increase the competitiveness of the country and encourage private-public cooperation," he said.