

COVID-19 reinforces solidarity, cooperation among ASEAN and partners

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PUTRAJAYA, Aug 8 -- ASEAN must adhere to three key elements namely, unwavering solidarity, strong political will and good governance to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, said Foreign Ministry secretary-general Datuk Seri Muhammad Shahrul Ikram Yaakob.

In his message in conjunction with the 53rd ASEAN Day, he said the theme 'Cohesive and Responsive' under Vietnam's ASEAN chairmanship in 2020 has gained added significance following the COVID-19 outbreak.

“The outbreak of COVID-19 reinforces the need for solidarity and cooperation at all levels, not just among ASEAN member states but also with its external partners,” he said.

Muhammad Shahrul Ikram said ASEAN leaders tackled such new and unprecedented challenge head-on during their virtual Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 in April.

ASEAN leaders also held a special summit with leaders of the Plus Three countries - China, Japan and the South Korea - to explore collaboration in public health emergencies and measures in mitigating the impact of COVID-19, among others.

“ASEAN has also engaged with several of its dialogue partners via video conference to find ways to respond to the pandemic and its threat to public health and the socio-economic well being of the people,” he said.

The 36th ASEAN Summit in June, also virtually, further deliberated on the challenges at hand and at the summit, Malaysia’s Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin underscored the need for ASEAN to act swiftly and decisively in coordinating a regional level response especially in revitalising the economies, he said.

In this regard, he said Muhyiddin had proposed for ASEAN to formulate a Regional Economic Recovery Plan and emphasised that supply chain connectivity should be preserved to ensure smooth flow of food, medical and essential supplies, and

highlighted the need to explore travel bubbles among green regions to facilitate business travels and revive tourism.

Muhammad Shahrul Ikram said Malaysia would continue to play a proactive role in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic by leading the ASEAN Emergency Operation Centre Network for Public Health Emergencies.

The role includes the circulation of daily situational updates and information on prevention, detection and response measures as well as real-time information sharing on confirmed cases and cross-border infections, he added.

Malaysia also hosts the ASEAN Risk Assessment and Risk Communication Centre (ARARC) which plays an instrumental role in disseminating prevention and control measures including preparedness and capacity building programmes, he said.

Moving forward, Muhammad Shahrul Ikram said ASEAN had begun the process of developing a Comprehensive Recovery Framework, focusing not just on the financial aspect of the economy, but also on social security and stability through ensuring safety nets and assisting the most vulnerable groups.

“With its spirit of unity in diversity, underpinned by ASEAN Centrality, I am confident that ASEAN will be able to continue to endure challenges in its path and emerge stronger,” he said.

Founded in 1967, ASEAN comprises Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

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