

April 2020 Issue 2

advisory

IMAN Research



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not COVID...and
definitely not
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IMAN Research is a think tank focusing on research and community engagement. Our research areas include preventing/ countering violent extremism (PCVE), socio-religious trends and public perception.



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editorial letter

April showers bring May flowers, as the idiom goes, and here we are, still under a movement control order (MCO) that will last until May 12th, 2020. This is of course, being hopeful, as many Malaysians see an extension lasting beyond Hari Raya.

If we began the first month under the RMO with great humour - the number of memes being viraled is proof of that - in the second month, we see Malaysians and the whole world facing challenges, not just economically, but also to their well-being. Among practitioners and researchers in the field, counter-terrorism and security trends remain on top of the radar, and we see ominous signs of soft infiltration.

Modern day Malaysia was built on the backs and blood of migrant foreign workers from poorer countries like Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal and India. In the face of the COVID-19, they see their livelihoods slashed, and their health jeopardised.

The new government has been aggressive in their efforts to assist Malaysians financially. The majority of Malaysians are applauding the strict measures demonstrated by the police and authorities, but will it end there? Observers all around the world are alluding that authoritarian leaders may use the COVID-19 crisis to tighten their grip.

This our new normal, our new reality. What is the roadmap moving forward?

Dina Zaman

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spread love, not COVID

...and definitely not hate!

Ways to challenge hate during COVID-19:

I. Spread a unifying narrative

– we are all in this together, so counter the hate you see online with peaceful narratives i.e. share positive experiences or stories from the MCO.

II. Volunteer or donate –

actively make a difference by contributing your time and funds to grassroots initiatives like #KitaJagaKita and charities that support the needy and marginalised communities.

III. Offer hope –

physical closeness may be impossible, but you can still offer emotional support and words of encouragement to family and friends who have been affected by the virus.

IV. Stay informed –

do not be swayed by emotion, always fact-check when consuming information about the virus's spread, and adopt necessary precautions. Be safe, not paranoid.

V. Take a break from social media –

as much as it serves to inform the masses, social media can also be filled with hate and negativity. Know when to disengage for a bit.

IN LAST MONTH'S Advisory, we highlighted the issue of hateful extremism in cyberspace that had escalated as a result of the political turmoil, and sudden change of government in late February. Although the political mudslinging was cast aside as the nation confronted COVID-19, sadly it did not end the perpetuation of racism and hate. If anything, the pandemic has morphed into an excuse to scapegoat and stigmatise certain communities.

Malaysia is now into a fourth phase of the Movement Control Order (MCO) set to begin on April 29th and end on May 12th, barring further extensions. While there is a high level of public compliance with the order and positive indication that we are breaking the chain of infection, this period has also exposed a darker side of some Malaysians. On social media primarily, some quarters have exploited the current fear and uncertainty, using it to discriminate against those they perceive to be at fault for the spread of the virus.

Several groups in particular have suffered an endless stream of hate and ridicule, including the Sri Petaling tabligh¹ attendees and foreign migrants, especially after they were linked to a recent spike in cases at two residential areas in KL.² Also not spared were individuals captured on video appearing to flout MCO regulations, who were subsequently vilified and subjected to racist attacks by netizens.

The situation in Malaysia is hardly surprising as it corresponds to a global trend in increased xenophobia and anti-migrant rhetoric since the onset of the outbreak in China. It started out with peddling stereotypes against Chinese nationals (especially about their diets and lifestyles), but soon extended to targeting communities in many parts of the world who already struggle with prejudice.

For instance, the COVID-19 crisis caused a rise in hate speech perpetrated by violent extremist groups towards Indonesian Chinese, prompting warnings of potential terror attacks aimed at the community.³ Meanwhile in India, the pandemic has exacerbated Hindu-Muslim discord after hundreds of infections were linked to a tabligh gathering in Delhi, spawning far-fetched allegations of a Muslim conspiracy to spread the virus.⁴

There are too many similar examples of xenophobia and racism around the world during this time, which have further polarised entire populations. This is one of the more severe unforeseen consequences of this pandemic, and has greatly hurt efforts to contain it globally.

Simultaneously, we need to contend with another effect of the virus – social stigma. In Malaysia, COVID-19 clusters and patients are increasingly stigmatised, with some of them continuing to feel isolated by friends and family even after recovering. The authorities have

repeatedly advised the public against this as it will discourage others from getting screened, not to mention, cause adverse mental health effects for those infected.

However, these appeals have so far fallen on deaf ears. Instead, the current health crisis has only reinforced pre-existing biases and stereotypes. And in the case where a COVID-19 positive patient is also from a persecuted community, the effects are potentially ten times worse.

We understand during these vulnerable times, discriminatory tendencies often surface due to a sense of frustration and hopelessness – not least because we are confronted with new cases daily, more deaths, and seemingly no end in sight.

In the battle against an unseen force, it is also extremely convenient to identify a scapegoat that suffers the brunt of our insecurities put together. But we cannot allow ourselves to be dragged into this trap.

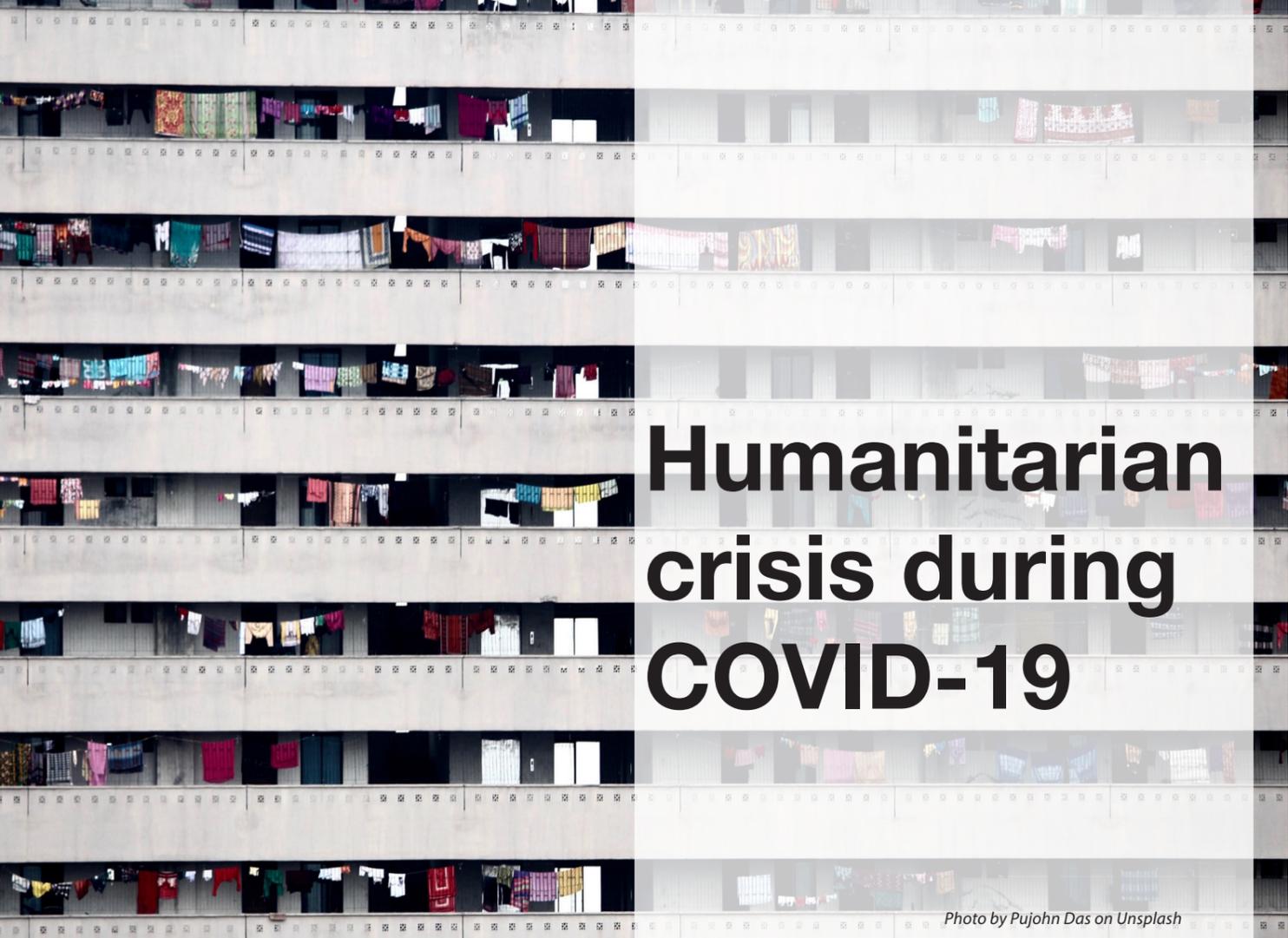
The coronavirus certainly does not discriminate, affecting us all equally regardless of creed, colour, and social status. We must not allow extremists to use the virus as a weapon to divide us further. As such, we implore all Malaysians to train their efforts instead on the many positive ways we can navigate this challenging time together, and come out on top.

¹ Religious gathering in late Feb that was attended by more than 16,000 participants and is so far the largest COVID-19 cluster in Malaysia, accounting for more than 1,700 positive cases

² The Selangor Mansion and Malayan Mansion flats along Jalan Masjid India have been placed under an enhanced MCO since Apr 7, after at least 15 cases were reported.

³ <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3078775/coronavirus-indonesia-warned-be-guard-anti-chinese-terrorism-amid>

⁴ <http://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20200413-coronavirus-pandemic-used-to-stir-up-anti-muslim-prejudice-in-india>



Humanitarian crisis during COVID-19

Photo by Pujohn Das on Unsplash

MALAYSIANS HAVE BEEN struggling to find ways to survive. Vulnerable communities especially, that are largely dependent on humanitarian agencies and their aid, have been experiencing more difficulties than others during this dark time.

Humanitarian support is needed now, more than ever, to combat COVID-19 in vulnerable areas like displaced communities, war zones, and countries with poor healthcare systems. These humanitarian agencies need more funding to prepare resources in the health sector; in terms of medication, facilities, and proper equipment.

This is in addition to the current need for food, clothing and educational support for the

vulnerable communities that are currently under their belt. Economic recession due to the COVID-19 virus has also created more people in need of assistance. As such, governments and other agencies will not be able to assist humanitarian groups as much to sustain their work and to address current needs of their target demographics.

On April 5th, a boat carrying 202 Rohingya refugees; which included 45 women and 5 children, landed in Langkawi. According to the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (APM), the refugees were smuggled by four men, who later abandoned them at sea. Their boat then landed on Langkawi beach, right in front of a luxury hotel,

where they were found.¹ All of the refugees were taken to a detention center, where they are currently quarantined. Defence Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob stated that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA), as well as the Immigration Department had been tasked to help the refugees.

Later, on April 16th, the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) found a boat carrying around 200 Rohingya refugees, 130km off the coast of Langkawi. Fearing that the Refugees might be infected with COVID-19, the RMAF turned the boat away and forced it back to sea.²

This decision was condemned by many, including the Human Rights Watch (HRW), saying that the Malaysian government can adequately respond to the pandemic without having to suspend the rescue of asylum seekers.³ The Bangladesh coast guard also rescued 396 Rohingya from a drifting boat after being turned back from Malaysia twice, resulting in 32 deaths.⁴

MIGRANTS DURING COVID-19

Often invisible, people seem to neglect the fact that migrants; both migrant workers and refugees that are currently residing in Malaysia, are also part of the vulnerable communities.

Some of them either have low monthly wages or are daily wage earners. Their limited financial ability also results in small units of overcrowded houses and the lack of food resources. Even during pre-pandemic days, they try their best to live within their limited means, but what about now?

Many of these groups have pleaded for help, especially for funds to help them pay their rent. As the MCO was enforced nationwide, migrants – especially the ones who earn daily wages have lost their income and are now at risk of losing the roof over their heads as well. NGOs have continued to express concerns and bring to light the condition of this population, similarly for the refugees in our country.

The situation is even more critical for migrants in Enhanced Movement Control Order (EMCO) areas. They are unable to leave their homes to

stock up on daily necessities, and even when this is possible, they face financial restraints. The aid they have received thus far, such as bags of rice and lentils, are not sufficient to accommodate the number of people in need. With some apartments being home to as many as 11 migrant workers, it does not take long for standard issuance to run out.

In addressing the needs of migrant workers, Senior Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri stated: “They can always get personnel at the operations centre to help obtain essential items, but they would have to pay for themselves and collect those items from a specific area.” This effectively means that migrants in EMCO areas need to fend for themselves until ‘caring Malaysians’ come forward to support them.⁵

From the perspective of the Malaysian government, the responsibility of supporting these foreigners falls on their respective embassies.⁶ This is a huge concern, as these migrant groups are at risk of contracting COVID-19. So far, three areas under EMCO have been closely linked to migrant communities; Selangor Mansion, Malayan Mansion and Selayang wet market area.

Despite living in a high-risk area, migrant communities remain incapable of practicing social distancing and do not have convenient access to hygiene products. If the migrant situation in Malaysia is mishandled, it could lead to another surge in COVID-19 cases like the one in Singapore. The city-state experienced a sharp increase in infections in the past weeks, with the current tally exceeding 11,000 cases. A vast majority of the cases are work permit holders residing in foreign worker dormitories.⁷

The Malaysian government must therefore work hand in hand with employers and embassies to ensure that migrant workers are also protected during this crisis.

PRIMARY CONCERNS:

LOSS OF INCOME
unable to buy food and pay rent



CRAMPED LIVING SITUATIONS
unable to practice social distancing



LACK OF ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE SERVICES



³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/18/malaysia-allow-rohingya-refugees-ashore>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-rohingya-ships/bangladesh-coast-guard-rescues-396-rohingya-from-drifting-boat-32-dead-idUSKCN21Y0AQ>

⁵ <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/04/09/foreigners-in-locked-down-kl-flats-to-get-free-meals-too/>

⁶ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/518599>

⁷ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/covid19-new-cases-singapore-apr-19-dormitories-12655866>

¹ <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/04/06/rohingya-who-arrived-on-boat-to-be-quarantined-in-langkawi/>

² <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/focus/2020/04/19/unhcr-urges-compassion-in-handling-of-rohingya-boat-people>

BORDER BLUES

MARITIME BORDER CONTROL IN SABAH

Eastern Sabah

Security of our borders continues to be a concern during the COVID-19 crisis. As observed by IMAN Research, during the first phase of the MCO, there were many movements of Filipino migrants leaving Sabah. This was due to the shortage of food supplies as many of the migrants reside in the smaller islands off the coast of Eastern Sabah with little to no access to aid, neither from the Malaysian government nor the civil society and charity organizations in Sabah. However, as Malaysia entered the second phase of the MCO, opposite movements were detected. This is due to the now available aids (pull-factor).

Illegal border crossings are still happening in Sabah waters, including a recent attempt by a kidnap-for-ransom-group (KFRG). As reported, the attempt was conducted in late March.¹ To enhance the security of Sabah waters, the Malaysian security forces are now collaborating with their counterparts in The Philippines to curb illegal crossings.² Meanwhile, the Indonesian Consulate in Sabah have asked their citizens to not enter Sabah, and for the ones currently in Sabah to obey the MCO and stay home.³

1 <https://www.sabahpost.net/2020/04/02/kumpulan-penculik-masih-cuba-masuk-sabah/>

2 <https://www.sabahnewstoday.com/perintah-esscom-kerjasama-dengan-filipina-perketat-kawalan-di-sempadan/>

3 <https://www.borneotoday.net/konsulat-indonesia-larang-rakyatnya-masuk-ke-tawau-secara-haram/>

Northern Peninsular Malaysia

Meanwhile in the northern border of Peninsular Malaysia, around 300 Thai nationals were reported to be stranded at the Malaysia-Thai border. The MCO has severely affected Thai workers in Malaysia, especially the ones working at tomyam shops, which prompted them to return to Thailand. But as the COVID-19 crisis worsened in Thailand, the government had ordered all of their borders to be shut down to impede the spread of the virus. All Thai nationals returning to the Kingdom were required to have proper documentation - health certificate- issued by tWVWhe embassy in Kuala Lumpur. As such, many were stranded at the northern border checkpoints, awaiting their documents.⁴ Media from Bangkok have reported that all the Thai nationals, mostly tomyam workers and fishermen, have been allowed to return to the Kingdom through the Wang Prachan-Wang Kelian checkpoint.

However, in mid-April, about 100 Thai nationals were caught illegally crossing the border to return to their country. Some who travelled all the way from Pahang (about 300 km from the border), feared that they would starve as they waited to be able to go back legally, and so decided to take their chances to cross the Sungai Kolok river. They were eventually caught by Thai officials, fined 800 bahts, and placed in quarantine for 14 days.⁵

Better Coordination

As governments fortify and strengthen borders, tighten and control movements to contain the spread of the virus, we need to be mindful of who might be left behind. We need to always remember that the act of securing borders is to keep people safe. Hence, we need to ensure that any and all measures we take will serve the sole purpose of protecting people, instead of making their situation even more precarious.

Therefore, to guarantee that everyone is protected, we need better assessment of what is happening on the ground, better communications, and better coordination among all stakeholders, not just within the country, but with all our neighbors as well. Securing borders requires a whole-society collaboration, as well as coordination with neighboring countries.

4 https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1888965/stranded-thais-allowed-to-return-from-malaysia#cxrecs_s

5 <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1901145/returnees-from-malaysia-jump-queue>

Pre-MCO

- Barter-trade and transshipment with The Philippines and Indonesia.
- Maritime border patrol by ESSCOM in targeted areas within ESSZONE. Only involving curfew which is extended every 2 weeks.
- Monitoring activities were focused on identifying entry of illegal migrants (PTI), Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), kidnap-for-ransom-group (KFRG) and piracy.

Under MCO

- Barter-trade and transshipment from all jetties in Sabah are halted (except within Sabah districts). However, a few pump boats from The Philippines have tried to go through the border, pretending to do transshipment. Monitoring activities were focused on identifying entry of illegal migrants (PTI), Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), kidnap-for-ransom-group (KFRG) and piracy.
- Maritime border patrol involving ESSCOM, Marine Police Force (PPM), Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (APM) and a few other security forces. Patrolling conducted at Sabah's west coast, east coast, and Labuan FT (not only within ESSZONE).
- Maritime patrolling, focused on townships. Security forces have begun to control movement of foreigners using rat-lanes. During the 2nd phase of MCO, the police (PDRM) and military (ATM) have begun to monitor the rat-lanes using drones, in order to detect pump boats movement in Sabah's waters after a KFRG attempt was detected.

AUTHORITARIANISM in the Time of COVID-19

MYANMAR

Aung San Suu Kyi refused early prevention measures, largely suggesting her people only to hand wash regularly.

Information censorship was imposed in the name of combating disinformation, with Rakhine state receiving very little internet access.

An image of a grim reaper figure spreading the virus which looked like a Buddhist monk resulted in three graffiti artists to be arrested.

THAILAND

The military threatens with a powerful emergency law, "health before freedom".

#WhyDoWeNeedAKing starts trending in expression of the people's disappointments, while in the south heavy militarised presence remains.

SINGAPORE

Singapore decided in the first week of April (after seeing a sudden spike) to extend the country's lockdown for a month, effectively putting schools and service sectors to a temporary halt

Two climate activists were taken in for questioning by the authorities for staging a protest without requesting official permission

VIETNAM

Vietnam imposes partial and full lockdowns in stages, and puts forth preventive and treatment measures across the country

Their swift measures to contain the virus, is equally as swift as their punitive measures against its critics.

THE PHILLIPPINES

Duterte orders police to; "shoot to kill", for anyone that violates the lockdown measures.

Clash between Filipino Army and the ASG in Sulu resulted in the death of 11 soldiers, with 14 others injured.

The Philippines maritime authority continues to cooperate with the Malaysian counterpart, in monitoring borders along the Sulu Sea. Recently, AFP personnels were ambushed by Abu Sayyaf militants.

MALAYSIA

The nation lockdown was put in stages along with temporary border closures and suspension of trading activities.

The PM's appointment of new political executives at several GLCs has prompted the Opposition to question the true intentions.

PDRM has charged several MCO violators and has given stern warning for those spreading false news.

INDONESIA

Jokowi's administration devises a new formula, bringing in the police and national intelligence agency to help manage the crisis, in addition to nationwide lockdowns manned by army personnel.

Press freedom takes a blow - as students and community activists get heavily scrutinised.

BY THE END of February, many governments in Southeast Asia began to realise the size of the calamity that was the COVID-19 pandemic, thus taking preventive measures more seriously. It was at this time that the virus began its journey out of China, mainly through popular air traffics and tourism-related activities.

As the number of victims continued to rise, governments scrambled to come up with measures that could act as a first-response. This was soon accomplished by imposing a "lockdown". This term is one that is freely interpreted by many,

with no practical understanding of its importance. Many borders and entry points were sealed off unilaterally, a move that eventuated in many people stranded and confused. Amidst the confusions, governments employed stricter rules, sans accountability.

Crackdown on human rights and press freedom (Thailand¹, Myanmar², Indonesia³ and Vietnam⁴), continued military presence (Thailand⁵, Myanmar⁶), stringent lockdown measures (The Philippines⁷), suspension of Parliament session (Malaysia⁸), as well as arrests over dissent

(Singapore⁹, Myanmar¹⁰) are some of the actions taken by regional governments during this crisis.

Freedom, Trust, and Security

During this COVID-19 pandemic, the delicate balance between freedom and security has become the main concern. As the virus rapidly spreads and affects many lives, authorities are taking hard measures to ensure safety of their citizens, putting aside the concern of individual freedom. And to the credit of citizens in this country and the region, many are foregoing their personal freedoms for a time,

adhering to strict movement control to help the authorities contain the situation and prevent it from becoming worse than it already is. However, governments shouldn't abuse the power given to them by their citizens for their own political gains.

It is crucial for governments and their citizens to trust each other. Governments need to trust their citizens so they can implement the necessary measures to ensure public safety, and citizens need to trust their government to not take their lives for granted and ensure that they are able and free to pursue a fulfilling and meaningful life. The current crisis is a test on this relationship. The future of governments and citizens will be very much determined by how each plays their part during this COVID-19 crisis.

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