

AKHBAR : HARIAN METRO

MUKA SURAT : 5

RUANGAN : LOKAL

Reports by IYLIA MARSYA ISKANDAR, FATIMAH ZAINAL and REMAR NORDIN

Experts: Don't unleash the Kraken

Tighten Covid-19 SOP as number of inbound tourists set to surge

PETALING JAYA: The Covid-19 standard operating procedure (SOP) needs to be tightened to deal with the expected influx of inbound tourists, say health experts.

They said this would be needed to prevent a surge of local transmissions, especially given the new variants of the virus.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia health economics and public health specialist Prof Dr Sharifa Ezat Wan Puteh suggested measures such as a negative Covid-19 test prior to departure, proof of full vaccination and compulsory Covid-19 travel insurance.

She said this aligned with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) recommendations that travellers be fully vaccinated to reduce the risk of transmission and infection.

"I would prefer a negative test before entry, such as an RT-PCR test 48 hours (before entry).

"It's true the variant may already be in Malaysia, but the sheer num-

ber of tourists coming in can cause a surge among locals," she added.

Prof Sharifa Ezat said the effects of new strains of Covid-19 such as XBB or Kraken are still unknown, but cases in other countries have surged due to the new variants, even among the vaccinated.

"There are a few countries that pose risk of a higher transmission influx into Malaysia. Two of these are the United States and China, but by sheer number of visitors, China will bring in more tourists compared with the United States.

"Hence, there should be a tighter SOP and greater scrutiny – not discriminatory towards any country, but overall," she added.

Prof Sharifa Ezat said a phasic approach (in stages and in a controlled manner) is needed because a sudden surge of visitors could lead to a higher burden of infections in the local community.

While it is expected that cases will increase and stretch the healthcare system, she said it would not

be as bad as the first and second waves of Covid-19 in 2020 and 2021, respectively, as most Malaysians are now vaccinated and boosted.

On Tuesday, the Health Ministry said it would maintain the current Covid-19 SOP for now and will examine seven key indicators in the country before deciding to tighten the rules, if necessary.

Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Dr Muruga-Raj Rajathurai said that since a Covid-19 test isn't required on tourists' departure and arrival, the Health Ministry must ensure continued surveillance efforts for the early detection of any imported cases of Covid-19, as well as genome sequencing of any new variants.

The MMA had previously urged the government to ensure that all travellers from countries seeing a significant rise in cases were fully vaccinated with proof of vaccination, and for them to conduct an RT-PCR test before departure and a professional RTK Antigen test with-

in 24 hours of arrival.

Dr Muruga Raj called for the Health Ministry to strengthen the healthcare system with sufficient manpower to manage a high patient load should there be a surge in the number of cases, and to maintain the highest standards in care.

"We believe the Health Ministry has taken the necessary steps to prepare for any possibility of a surge, but we can't say if we are ready.

"We know, however, that there are some manpower shortages in many public healthcare facilities due to a maldistribution of healthcare workers in public hospitals and clinics around the country," he said.

He also encouraged the public to observe individual preventive measures such as wearing face masks in enclosed spaces, especially those who are in high-risk groups.

Federation of Private Medical Practitioners' Association Malaysia president Dr Steven Chow said the

public currently needs an affirmative declaration from the ministry on whether Covid-19 is still a public health problem, and not make ad hoc changes to the SOP.

He said the Health Ministry should also provide historical and current data to support its position.

"If Covid-19 is no longer a public health problem, then all these ad hoc proposals are irrelevant and what is needed is just sensible precautions like with other common respiratory viral illnesses.

"Theoretically, we would have achieved the basic criteria of herd immunity based on the total prevalence of confirmed cases, completed vaccinated population, and projected undiagnosed infected cases.

"To create alarm at this stage is counter-productive to the process of the economic and mental health recovery of the nation, especially when there are effective specific antiviral medications available," he said.

'Current rules for tourists good enough'

PETALING JAYA: While there is a need for more vigilance, there is no need for a sweeping revision of the current Covid-19 standard operating procedure (SOP) for tourists, say industry players.

They say that returning to the dark days of the virus – which justified strict measures such as requiring tourists to take Covid-19 tests and insurance, as well as showing proof of vaccination – were not necessary at this point in time.

This is because the existing Covid-19 protocol outlined by the Health Ministry follows current Covid-19 indicators and as such, are adequate to protect public health, they say.

Malaysian Association Of Tour And Travel Agents (MATTA) president Datuk Tan Kok Liang said it would be premature to re-impose revised requirements such as Covid-19 tests, insurance and vaccination proof.

"Even the World Health Organisation (WHO) has yet to provide such recommendations other than recommendations of face masks for long haul flights.

"While we must be vigilant, reintroducing restrictions without proper risk-assessments based on comprehensive scientific evidence will not only be ineffective but also

potentially disastrous from an economic standpoint," he said.

Tan added that Covid-19 SOP should follow WHO benchmarking and non-pharmaceutical measures to prevent subvariant outbreaks must be used.

He also said that procedures involving MySejahtera, which stressed travellers out, should not be reintroduced.

Malaysia Inbound Tourism Association (Mita) president Uzaidi Udanis also felt that a return to the old SOP is not necessary at this point of time although he agreed that heightened vigilance must be practised at all times.

"We have to depend on instructions from the Health Ministry and I think they know better.

"The Malaysian health authorities will study all the Covid-19 indicators before deciding on the SOP.

"If that happens, we will give our support and will cooperate and whatever the decision is by the Health Ministry, we have to ensure that all tourism players understand what's the latest SOP," he said.

Uzaidi added that, three years on after the virus upended the world, there is a need to live with Covid-19 and there should not be a return to drastic measures.



Tropical paradise: Tourists from Australia looking at a pamphlet on Sabah as they plan a visit to the state. — AZMAN GHANI/The Star

On the expected influx of tourists to Malaysia this year including the long-missing Chinese tourists, Uzaidi said there are currently no signs yet that they will return in large numbers.

This is due to factors such as the lack of flights from China to Malaysia. China on Sunday opened its borders and lifted Covid-19 measures, as a move away from its zero-Covid game plan.

"There are currently not enough flights available so the pricing is also on the high side.

"We have lots of inquiries and requests for quotations but no real

groups are coming in yet.

"It's a matter of time. We hope by August and September and the Chinese Golden Week we can get more groups coming in to visit," Uzaidi said, referring to the seven-day Golden Week holiday from Oct 1 to Oct 7.

Besides Malaysia, other South-East Asian countries are also keeping their entry requirements loose for all tourists, including from China.

Thailand, which initially had an entry policy requiring visitors to show proof of Covid-19 vaccination, revoked the rule a few days ago, cit-

ing sufficient immunisation levels in China and globally.

Indonesia is welcoming Chinese tourists without restrictions and entry regulations remain the same as other tourists, which is that visitors entering Indonesia are required to show proof of full vaccination but no longer need Covid-19 tests.

Singapore has also said there would be no changes in its Covid-19 measures for travellers from China.

Foreigners who are not fully vaccinated need to undergo pre-departure tests, while short-term visitors are required to buy insurance for Covid-related medical expenses.

AKHBAR : THE STAR

MUKA SURAT : 4

RUANGAN : NATION



ANTARA kenderaan mewah yang digunakan sindiket untuk menyeludup e-rokok serta cecair vape.

'Orang kaya' seludup vape

Sindiket 'orang berada' guna kenderaan mewah diubah suai kononnya mudah lempi sempadan

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Bukan hanya lori atau treler, malah puluhan kenderaan mewah turut digunakan sindiket tempatan bagi tujuan menyeludup rokok elektronik (e-rokok) atau cecair vape nikotin ke Singapura.

Berdasarkan tangkapan dan rampasan dilakukan Penguasa Imigresen dan Pusat Pemeriksaan (ICA) terhadap mendapati pelbagai model kenderaan mewah antaranya Mercedes Benz, BMW, Audi selain kenderaan pelbagai guna Toyota Vellfire.

Sumber berkata, sindiket mungkin beranggapan kenderaan mewah ini lebih mudah untuk melepasi pemeriksaan di pintu sempadan negara berbanding kereta model biasa.

"Mungkin sindiket berasakan 'status' sebagai orang kaya yang memandu kenderaan mewah 'dihormati' di mata penguat kuasa. Ke-

Sorok cecair nikotin di kepala lori

Kuala Lumpur: Produk rokok elektronik (e-rokok) atau cecair vape nikotin yang diseludup ke negara jiran dikesan kerap disembunyikan di bahagian kepala lori atau dipanggil sebagai 'Prime Mover'.

Mendedahkan perkara itu, Timbalan Ketua Pengarah Kastam (Penguatkuasaan dan Pematuhan), Datuk Sazali Mohamad berkata, kebiasaannya produk e-rokok dan cecair vape yang tidak diikrar eksport kepada pihak Jabatan Kastam Diraja Malaysia (JKDM) disembunyikan dalam kuantiti kecil.

Menurutnya, sindiket turut gemar menggunakan modus operandi dengan menyembunyikannya dalam kerusi penumpang atau but kenderaan.

Di samping itu, jelas beliau, pemeriksaan kerap dilakukan JKDM bersama agensi lain seperti Jabatan Perkhidmatan Kuarantin dan Pemeriksaan Malaysia (MAQIS) serta Lembaga Perindustrian Kayu Malaysia

rana itu mereka memilih pelbagai model kenderaan mewah untuk melakukan kerja penyeludupan e-rokok dan cecair vape.

"Kebiasaannya kenderaan mewah ini dibawa ke beng-

kel khas bagi tujuan ubah suai beberapa bahagian komponen terutama di but kenderaan, pintu, tempat duduk, papan pemuka, lantai dan tempat penyimpanan tayar ganti," katanya.

Menurutnya, bungkusan kotak mengandungi e-rokok, cecair vape atau rokok seludup dimasukkan ke bahagian sulit berkenaan sebelum ia dipateri, dilekatkan atau ditutup semula dengan

(MTIB).

"Seperti dijelaskan sebelum ini, vape bukan dagangan dalam senarai larangan eksport. Maka pemeriksaan lebih ketat perlu diberi fokus terhadap dagangan lebih berisiko seperti disenarai dalam perintah larangan eksport.

"Untuk dagangan yang tersenarai dalam larangan eksport pula, JKDM mendapati terdapat kekerapan percubaan eksport tanpa kebenaran yang agak tinggi.

"Namun, disebabkan pemeriksaan yang kerap dan imbasan secara rambang menyebabkan JKDM dapat mengurangkan aktiviti penyeludupan ini," katanya.

Menurutnya, imbasan 100 peratus lori kargo menyebabkan kesesakan luar biasa di laluan utama keluar negara.

"Berikutan itu hanya lori atau treler kargo dikenal pasti berisiko akan diimbas. Fokus imbasan lebih diberikan terhadap lori kargo yang membawa muatan tinggi," katanya.



"Mungkin sindiket berasakan 'status' orang kaya yang memandu kenderaan mewah 'dihormati' di mata penguat kuasa. Kerana itu mereka memilih pelbagai model kenderaan mewah untuk melakukan kerja penyeludupan"

Sumber

lapisan asal.

"Bagaimanapun, kelengkapan alat pengimbas X-ray berteknologi tinggi milik ICA mampu mengesan taktik digunakan itu. Ia terbukti susulan rampasan demi rampasan produk e-rokok dan cecair vape dilakukan hampir setiap minggu," katanya.

Menurutnya, berdasarkan maklumat diperoleh, pihak berkuasa Singapura baru-baru ini merampas 792 e-rokok diseludup dari Malaysia menggunakan kereta

mewah Audi.

Turut dirampas 3,093 pod isi semula e-rokok yang turut cuba diseludup menggunakan kereta Audi selain 4,000 e-rokok dan 3,120 pod isi semula e-rokok disembunyikan dalam kereta mewah model Mercedes Benz.

"Manakala pada 23 November tahun lalu, sindiket menggunakan kereta Audi untuk menyeludup 2,700 pod isi semula e-rokok selain 100 e-rokok pakai buang. Rampasan sama turut dilakukan terhadap 145 produk e-rokok disembunyikan di bawah tempat duduk dan lantai kenderaan MPV Toyota Vellfire," katanya.

Sabtu lalu Harian Metro mendedahkan kegiatan sindiket penyeludupan yang semakin aktif menyeludup e-rokok dan cecair vape nikotin ke negara jiran.

Sindiket itu dikesan menjana 'ekonomi gelap' mencecahkan pendapatan puluhan juta ringgit setahun hasil aktiviti penyeludupan skala besar rokok (e-rokok) dan cecair vape nikotin ke republik Singapura serta Thailand.