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'Nothing spared in glove factory probe'

Entire labour department to be sent to investigate worker conditions, says Minister

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PETALING JAYA: The Labour Department has been told to completely focus on probing working and housing conditions at Top Glove factories to contain the outbreak of the nation's most active Covid-19 cluster, said Human Resource Minister Datuk Seri M Saravanan.

The National Security Council (NSC) deliberated on the importance of containing the cluster comprising foreign workers at the world's biggest rubber glove producer and decided that the government departments must go "full force" to stop the spread, he told *The Star*.

"We are not merely sending a team to check on the conditions at Top Glove. It will be the entire Labour Department.

"We will complete everything within a week and will put everything in black and white.

"This is a matter of life and death

of vulnerable workers, which must be contained now itself – no two ways about it," said Saravanan.

Top Glove currently employs over 21,000 workers nationwide. It has 28 factories in Klang alone, the epicentre of the Teratai cluster.

On Nov 23, the NSC decided Top Glove must close its factories in stages after Covid-19 was found breaching the worker's circle.

The cluster first emerged on Nov 7 and now has 4,036 cases. From the total, over 80% are foreign workers. Saravanan, who visited the plant days ago with Labour Department officers, said the workers' housing conditions were deplorable.

"Top Glove must adhere to NSC instructions and close down its factories in stages.

"We have started investigations and will spare no one if they were found to have flouted labour laws.

"I have visited the hostels and the conditions are terrible. My officers were ordered to go in full force as

this is a big, vulnerable migrant workers colony. If we don't act, this cluster might get out of control.

"The Labour Department will ensure the employers are held responsible for worker conditions and dire action will be taken according to the law," said Saravanan.

In photos and video clips from the minister, the hostels seem to be crowded and unsanitary.

In July, a US import ban was placed on two Top Glove subsidiaries by the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) over allegations of forced labour.

In reply, on Oct 24, Top Glove said it has resolved issues highlighted by the US Department of Labour (DOL).

Top Glove stated that it was looking for a quick reverse on the ban via remediation payments to its workers over their recruitment fees on a monthly basis, starting August and expected to finish on July 2021.

International Trade and Industry Ministry deputy secretary-general

(trade) Datuk Seri Norazman Ayob said firms in Europe and US now emphasise issues like sustainability, labour rights and the environment.

"Malaysian firms wishing to access such markets, they will have to prioritise managing these issues," said Norazman, who was also the Malaysian chief negotiator for the biggest free trade deal, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership rectified by Asean last week.

There was some concern among rights groups that the current negative situation over labour rights may also downgrade Malaysia's global human rights ranking as the country is currently on the Tier 2 Watch List for the third consecutive year.

In June last year, *The Star* reported that the US State Department placed Malaysia on the Tier 2 Watch List in its latest Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report.

The annual report said the Malaysian government did not fully meet minimum standards for the elimina-

tion of trafficking but was making significant efforts to do so.

Countries on Tier 2 are those that do not fully meet the Trafficking Victims Protection Act's minimum standards, but are making significant efforts to meet those standards.

The Tier 2 Watch List is similar to Tier 2, but with three more criteria, including failure to give evidence of increasing efforts, or where victim numbers are significant or increased.

The report said efforts made by Malaysia included convicting slightly more traffickers, issuing a significant number of passes for victims' freedom of movement from shelters and establishing additional shelter for adult female trafficking victims, though it had not yet served victims.

In the 2017 TIP report, Malaysia was upgraded to Tier 2 from the Tier 2 Watch List but slipped back in the Watch List last year.

Between 2006 and 2018, Malaysia was classified on Tier 2 Watch List nine times.

Health DG: Teratai most active cluster in the country

By JOSEPH KAOS Jr
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PUTRAJAYA: The Teratai cluster in Selangor continues to see a massive spike in Covid-19 cases.

Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham said the cluster alone recorded 1,511 cases out of 1,623 in Selangor – 93.1% of the state's total.

The Teratai cluster is currently the biggest and most active infection cluster in the country, recording a total 4,036 positive cases since Nov 7.

"Medical and public health assistance teams have been dispatched to the affected areas to implement preventative and control measures.

"This includes conducting large scale Covid-19 screenings," he said in a statement.

Dr Noor Hisham said while the government's movement control order (MCO) during this third wave still allowed the economic sector to operate, employers must also contribute in controlling the transmission of Covid-19 in the country.

"The government's approach with the enhanced MCO or the condition-



Leaving for treatment: Top Glove workers who tested positive for Covid-19 leaving with their luggage for Hospital Sungai Buloh at the Top Glove Klang workers' dormitory, Taman Daya Meru.

al MCO in selected areas was in the interest of both the health and economic sectors. The country saw the importance of life and livelihood.

"But the success of this strategy requires a high level of cooperation from employers to ensure workers, as well as work practices, are compliant towards the standard operat-

ing procedures (SOP)," he said.

Dr Noor Hisham said for industries that employ many foreign workers, the onus is on them to give conducive accommodations and to ensure preventive steps are taken.

This includes ensuring checking workers' temperatures and for symptoms before coming to work

and having clean common areas.

Employers are also urged to ensure physical distancing among workers and prevent them from gathering in large groups or confined spaces.

"The ministry urges employers to play a bigger role in fighting the Covid-19 transmission in Malaysia," he said.

Top Glove working with authorities to fight pandemic

KLANG: Top Glove Corporation Bhd will continue carrying the necessary measures to curb the Covid-19 infection among its workers.

In an issued statement, Top Glove said it was working closely with the authorities to fight the pandemic.

"Top Glove wishes to assure our customers we are working closely with the authorities through this period towards ensuring the continued safety and well-being of our employees and local community, which remains our utmost priority," the statement read.

It added that the company would continue adhering to the Covid-19 preventive SOP on a stringent basis.

"Disinfection exercises at our premises and accommodation are also conducted regularly, with

all the necessary precautionary measures strictly in place," the statement further read.

Top Glove is in the centre of attention after Covid-19 infection spread at its Meru workers' hostels and accommodation through the Teratai cluster.

So far, about 2,524 people out of 5,767 tested from the cluster turned up positive for the coronavirus.

The statement reiterated that the company was working closely with the relevant authorities in managing its affected manufacturing facilities in Meru.

Top Glove said it was also closely collaborating with the authorities to conduct the screening of its workforce in its factories in Meru.

"We have temporarily stopped production in 16 of our facilities in Meru beginning Nov 17 to date, with the balance 12 facilities operating at much reduced capacities," added the statement.

The firm also assured its stakeholders it was fully committed in doing its part to help prevent the further spread of Covid-19 while supporting the needs of its customers, employees, business partners and the communities it served.

Fear rising in Klang amid glove factory cluster

By WANI MUTHIAH
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KLANG: The once busy and overcrowded area where several Top Glove factory units are located in Meru is now like a ghost town.

Local residents in the area say they are scared to leave their homes as the area has recorded over 1,000 Covid-19 positive cases.

The infections took root from the Teratai cluster and were linked to Top Glove – the world's biggest medical latex producer.

Single mother S. Ganeswary can't enjoy staying indoors since she lives in Taman Seri Meru, very near the location placed under enhanced movement control order (MCO).

The 57-year-old single mother of two earns a living going from house-to-house to do cleaning work.

But Ganeswary says she is scared when she steps out of her house due to the high number of Covid-19 positive cases in the area.

"I take every precaution possible like wearing a mask and washing

my hands regularly, but there is still the nagging feeling that I too can get infected," she added.

R. Letchumi, 69, who is a cleaner in an iron products company located next to one of the Top Glove factories, says that she prays very hard before going to work daily.

"I pray that Covid-19 will spare me and my husband who is ill at home currently," she added.

The Top Glove factory next to her work place is one of the premises closed after some of its workers tested positive for Covid-19.

Izzat Nazni, 20, who also lives in Taman Seri Meru said the Top Glove situation has made residents in the area wary of foreigners.

"It is not a nice thing but people have become frightened of foreign workers in the area," said Izzat, who helps his mother in her kuih supply business.

He added there are many foreign workers who work in other nearby factories who rent houses in the area he stays in.

According to Izzat, whenever for-

foreign workers pass by on their way to work, the neighbourhood's local residents quickly move away and look at them with suspicion.

"I suppose it's because everyone is frightened," he added.

Meanwhile, Meru assemblyman Mohd Fakhruddin Mohd Mokhtar urged authorities to stop operations at all Top Glove plants in the area.

Currently, only 16 premises stopped while 12 more were operating at a reduced capacity.

He added it was crucial to ensure that stringent preventative measures are in place to stop the infection from spreading.

Klang MP Charles Santiago said employers must ensure there is ample space for workers to practice social distancing at the workplace as well as in the hostels.

"For example, there should not be any bed sharing. Bathrooms must also not be shared by too many workers and kept very clean at all times," said Santiago.

He urged the Human Resources Ministry to come down hard on

employers who do not meet Covid-19 protective measure standards imposed on hostels and dorms.

"Enough time has been given and the government must ensure the formulated accommodation guidelines are implemented with immediate effect," he added.

Kapar MP Datuk Abdullah Sani Abdul Hamid said factory operators must also inform authorities immediately if an employee tests positive.

"They must not try to fix the problem on their own," added Abdullah Sani.

He said the situation will get out of control if the authorities are not informed immediately.

"The right thing to do would be to hand over the premises to the Health Department and other relevant authorities when even one person in there tests positive," added Abdullah Sani.

Senior Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob said on Monday that all 28 Top Glove plants in the Kapar area will be closed in stages for mass testing of its workers.