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## Omicron reignites fear, but 'No' to mass lockdown

*Impact will be on import and export activities because once there is a lockdown, transport charges will go up due to limited flights*

by NURHANANI AZMAN

INDUSTRY players and economic experts said "No" to large-scale lockdown amid heightened concern on the new Covid-19 variant, Omicron.

Economic activities' restrictions due to the lockdown could derail all efforts that have been spent in the past months to bring

economic recovery and business stability to the country.

Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers president Tan Sri Soh Thian Lai said there is renewed concern on the current situation as well as its potential threat to the effectiveness of the Covid-19 vaccines and impact on businesses.

"The industry would, however, support any need for targeted controls should there be any spike in infections due to the new variant. In the event there needs to be any targeted lockdowns instituted, then the industry would really need very clear guidelines and standard operating procedures

(SOPs) on operations allowed to operate," he told *The Malaysian Reserve (TMR)*.

Omicron was first reported to the World Health Organisation by South Africa on Nov 24 and it has since been discovered in other countries outside Africa, including Belgium, Hong Kong, Britain, Germany, Italy and Israel.

According to Health DG Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, Malaysia has yet to detect cases of the new variant.

Soh said nevertheless, robust Covid-19 SOPs and preventive measures have been put in place by companies, including the testing of workers based on risk assessment.

SME Association of Malaysia national VP

Chin Chee Seong said it is still early to judge but looking at restrictions taken by certain countries in response to the new variant, he said it obviously would affect Malaysia too.

The impact will be towards import and export activities because once there is a lockdown, the transport charges will go up due to the limited number of flights.

"The likelihood is the government will continue to provide support for SMEs (small and medium enterprises) through Budget 2022 as planned. A lot of allocation has been put there. Now, the government needs to find the money.

see P4 col1



# Private university students enrolment may pick up amid recovery

Monash University sees encouraging student intake in October 2021

by AZALEA AZUAR

PRIVATE university enrolment experienced a decline due to Covid-19, but is expected to chart a recovery due to the country's reopening.

Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities president Datuk Dr Parmjit Singh observed a drop of between 5% and 13% among universities during the pandemic.

"It could be attributed to a number of factors including monetary issues as the pandemic affected everyone financially; visa issues because of travel restrictions; or the lack of interest in online classes," he told *The Malaysian Reserve* (TMR).

Commenting on whether students are losing interest to travel abroad for studies due to the pandemic, Parmjit said that was irrelevant.

"No, no it would not happen. Plans might be delayed, but those who want to go overseas to pursue their studies would go for it and would not change their mind," he said.

As such, academicians expect the enrolment among foreign students to pick up as

Malaysia heads towards recovery.

For example, Monash University Malaysia saw an encouraging student intake in October 2021.

Its VP (Education) Prof Beverly Webster said as Malaysia and the world head towards the recovery stage, students will soon resume their studies.

"We are grateful that students and parents have continued to place their confidence and trust in us, as we can see with the promising numbers," she told TMR.

Webster said the university has made great use of virtual classrooms to engage students in synchronous learning, teaching and assessment during the pandemic.

"We have built staff and student capabilities (using) a range of educational technologies for communication and collaboration.

"Monash has developed and implemented an e-Assessment platform, enabling the use of e-Vigilation for exams," she added.

As students are returning for physical lessons after a long period of online classrooms, Webster said the university is preparing to welcome them with a rich learning experience and on-campus experience, as well as co-curricular activities.

"Besides academics, Monash University

has also recognised the importance of equipping students with the range of skills that working and collaborating in a virtual environment requires.

"Having digital literacy skills positions our graduates well as they embark on their careers, therefore these virtual experiences will be part of the portfolio of offerings for students enrolled at Monash Malaysia," she added.

The National Association of Private Educational Institutions (Napei) reported that international students already accepted for enrolments are experiencing problems getting their visas approved by the Immigration Department of Malaysia.

Earlier this year, Napei president Assoc Prof Elajsolan Mohan told TMR that the visa approval delay is another hurdle for local colleges that are already suffering a drop in enrolment numbers this year, due to travel restrictions as well as pandemic concerns.

Elajsolan said large private higher learning institutions could see such enrolments down by between 500 and 1,000 new students.

He said private universities are looking at a 50% reduction in international students this year and even the intake for local students is uncertain whether they can match the previous year's numbers.

# Malaysia-S'pore to expand VTL, says Ismail Sabri

FROM P1 from their families due to the Covid-19 pandemic, to be reunited with their loved one — which we know the people of both Malaysia and Singapore have long awaited for."

Both of the leaders also deliberated on the cross-border travel by air between Singapore and destinations in Malaysia like Penang, Langkawi, Kuching and Kota Kinabalu.

"Both of us decided that our officials should start to draw up measures for this purpose," the PM said.

Malaysia and Singapore launched both the land and air VTLs simultaneously yesterday, after the Causeway was shut for 20 months due to the pandemic.

For now, the land VTL initiative, which allows quarantine-free travel, is only for vaccinated individuals who are citizens, permanent residents and long-term pass holders of Malaysia and Singapore.

Ismail Sabri said he had also discussed with his counterpart additional measures that both will undertake with regard to cross-border travels between Malaysia and Singapore.

The PM added that both Malaysia and Singapore will embark on more active multi-level engagements and a much stronger cooperation in post-pandemic recovery efforts.

"This is crucial also for our cooperation in undertaking effective and meaningful recovery efforts so that our countries will come out stronger following the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic," Ismail Sabri said.

Bloomberg reported Lee as saying that Singapore wants to have more open borders with Malaysia, amid the emergence of new Covid variant, Omicron.

"Of course, all this is Covid-19 permitting because we're all watching anxiously to see what the Omicron variant of the Covid-19 does and how it will behave," Lee said in the report. "But even if Omicron disrupts these plans, our goal will still be to have more open borders between Singapore and Malaysia and after some time, we will be able to make further progress."

Lee also said that Malaysia has suggested reviving talks for a high speed rail (HSR) project that was cancelled last year.

"Singapore is open to fresh proposals on the HSR. The two ministries will discuss the matter so we can study them and start from a clean slate," Lee said.

Additionally, during the discussion, Ismail Sabri said they agreed on the need to resume work on their existing bilateral mechanisms.

"This includes the 10th Annual Leaders' Retreat, which we have not been able to convene during the past two years due to the pandemic," he said, adding that he looks forward to attending the Leaders' Retreat in the first quarter of next year.

"This is important to ensure that our multi-faceted cooperation and outstanding issues are kept on the right track with a positive momentum going forward. Subsequently, PM Lee and I will discuss the progress of these bilateral mechanisms at our Leaders' Retreat," he said.

# Omicron reignites fear, but 'No' to mass lockdown

FROM P1 "To be frank, there are many grants and also subsidies from the government are very slow. Some of the SMEs don't even get it even after two years. So, it is hard for the government to introduce another financial aid at the moment," he told TMR.

Bank Islam Malaysia Bhd chief economist Dr Mohd Afzanizam Abdul Rashid said the new variant will have a negative impact as the immediate impression would be another round of lockdown measures will make a comeback.

"If that happens, it will affect the recovery momentum. We have learned that vaccination is key to how we can curb the virus spread and its severity. And the government is prepared to launch the booster shot. In that sense, the country is in the know on how to respond accordingly.

"Lockdown will affect economic activities as what we saw in the second quarter of 2020 (2Q20), 4Q20 and 3Q21, whereby the GDP would experience another round of contraction," he told TMR.

When asked what kind of government financial response and capability is needed, Mohd Afzanizam thinks it would be fairly the same where economic activities would need to be restricted in order to curb the spread.

"Embracing the new norms such as working from home and adhering to the SOPs are the way to go," he said.

Apex Investment Services Bhd CEO Clement Chew said recently, the market has been gravitating towards reopening and



Chew says there is likely to be an overhang until markets are able to understand the implications of Omicron

Omicron is a jolt to investors' confidence.

He said there is likely to be an overhang until markets are able to understand the implications of Omicron. The markets want to find out the severity of the new variant in terms of hospitalisations and deaths, and also on how it responds to vaccines and treatments.

"Renewed curbs and lockdowns will force investors to review their assumptions for demand, growth and earnings. There is likely to be a downward adjustment in forecasts if lockdowns are re-imposed."

"We already see some countries re-introducing restrictions on inbound travel. Unfor-

tunately, the sentiment for sectors such as hospitality and airlines will be hit again," he told TMR.

Chew said most governments have run wider fiscal deficits to provide stimulus for their respective pandemic-hit economies.

"Most governments will not favour re-imposing extensive lockdowns of their economies. Closing their borders to visitors may be a more likely scenario. It is a wait and see situation for now.

"If lockdowns are imposed, the government may be forced to extend cash aid and defer loan repayments again," he said.