

Risks and gains of lifting curbs

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While Singapore has opened its borders to more countries, experts in Malaysia are split on balance on reopening of borders. – REUTERS/Pix

PETALING JAYA: It is a tough choice. Health experts and economists agree that international borders should reopen but, as expected, they disagree on how it should be done.

Doctors recommend a gradual approach but for the economists, a blanket lifting of all Covid-19 curbs is necessary to give the economy the much-needed spurt.

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Malaysian Medical Association president Dr Koh Kar Chai noted that the pandemic, coupled with its high mortality rate, has had a devastating impact on the mental health of the population.

“Getting the economy pumping again will do wonders to improve the mental health,” he told *theSun*.

“It is no secret that we have to act now to revive the economy,” he added.

Chairman of the National Recovery Council (NRC) Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said last week that the government should have a definite time-line for reopening the country's borders.

"We cannot keep our borders closed all the time. (As long as the borders remain closed) the economic recovery process will not happen," he told reporters at a Chinese New Year reception organised by Gerakan.

He conceded that the economy has begun to heal but added that whatever has been achieved so far has been "limited". "(At this rate) we will not succeed," he added.

In January, the NRC recommended that curbs on the entry of international travellers be lifted in stages beginning in March.

"The government must have a definite time-line ... one month, two months ... to reopen the borders," Muhyiddin had said then.

Koh pointed out that health experts are still getting to know more about Covid-19.

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"The learning process has been complicated by the regular emergence of new variants as the SARS-Cov-2 virus continues to mutate," he said.

Koh added that based on prevailing knowledge of the Omicron variant, health experts agree that it is safe to loosen travel restrictions by reopening borders.

"A gradual reopening (of the borders) will enable us to take the necessary mitigating measures in the event that a new wave of infection becomes imminent."

Koh said current measures, which include vaccination, enforcement of the standard operating procedures (SOP), screening of international travellers and quarantine requirements are the right way to go.

However, Universiti Utara Malaysia professor of economics Dr K. Kuperan Viswanathan is of the view that only a quick removal of all restrictions will help in economic recovery.

"The economy has contracted by 4.5%. We need a blanket lifting of all curbs to help it recover," he told *theSun*.

Otherwise, he said, the country could get into more serious economic troubles. "It could lead to high unemployment, inflation and even social unrest," he said.

Kuperan pointed out that once the curbs are lifted, it could boost economic activities such as investments and trade, the cornerstone of an open economy such as Malaysia's.

"Opening up the borders will also reduce the inflation rate and enhance economic growth and promote employment. These are fundamental for the economic well-being of all Malaysians," he said.

Kuperan said the time has come for such restrictions to be removed given that 75% of the population have already been vaccinated.

“We should move forward and treat the pandemic as though it is already under control and open up the borders and the economy. All we have to do is to ensure that the SOP are in place to detect infected arrivals and isolate them as required,” Kuperan added.