

Take heed of threats from 4 areas in 'new normal'

By Dr G. Periasamy - May 28, 2020 @ 12:10am



(File pic) New normal adapted as the customers follows the social distancing rules. -NSTP/SAIFULLIZAN TAMADI.

THE emergence of the deadly Covid-19 virus has transformed the global socio-economic and socio-political landscapes. While we are still acclimatising to the "new normal" resulting from the pandemic, the government and public should take heed of the possible threats from four areas. They should ensure whatever develops will not further harm the nation and people.

The first area is cybersecurity. The pandemic has resulted in several sectors turning towards digitalisation. Education delivery, organising meetings and conducting businesses are among the few. In other words, the Internet is the indispensable global instrument of communication for continuity at the moment.

What might be overlooked is the threat arising from the digital space, including the risk of cyberattacks due to increased reliance on digital platforms. Approximately 900,000 threats from phishing emails, URL and files were reported from January to March 2020, according to Smart Protection Network.

The malicious sites may steal passwords, sensitive information and more importantly gather intelligence and cause huge financial losses. In 2017, economic loss in Malaysia due to cybersecurity incidents was estimated at RM49.15 billion.

Secondly, food security. The Movement Control Order (MCO) from March 18 to June 9 caused anxiety about the food supply chain. We have ample agricultural land (86,270 sq km) but we have yet to reach a self-sufficient level. In 2019, our self-sufficiency in rice was at 70 per cent; vegetables, 46.6 per cent; beef, 23.9 per cent; mutton, 11.2 per cent; fresh milk, 61.3 per cent; dairy products, 5.0 per cent; and fruits, 79 per cent.

Our food imports totalled RM50 billion in 2018 alone. Considering our food trade deficit more than doubled from RM8.5 billion in 2006 to RM18.6 billion in 2016, the government formed a Cabinet Committee on Food Security and is in the midst of formulating a National Food Security Policy.

Though timely, there are many details to consider, primarily, the effect of climate change, application of new technologies, R&D and eliminating over-reliance on foreign labour. Former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger, in a report in 1974, cautioned that food can be used as a weapon to cripple another economy. Therefore, we must be prepared.

Thirdly, border security. The Malaysia-Thailand border is approximately 767km long. It is guarded by a basic surveillance system with barbed wire fencing and a wall. We also have a long maritime border covering a total of 4,675km of coastline. Scarce resources and manpower mean our border is more porous, allowing illegal immigrants to get in easily.

The number of illegal immigrants now is causing enormous concern. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there were approximately 179,520 refugees and asylum-seekers in Malaysia at the end of March 2020. About 154,560 or 86 per cent are Rohingya. In addition, based on 2018 data, there are 3.85-to-5.3 million migrant workers here. What is even worse is the high number of Covid-19 infections in this group. We should find alternatives and no longer depend on them.

Fourthly, environmental security. Environmental degradation and climate change should be addressed adequately. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre in 2018 revealed that climate change was the top threat in half of 26 countries. The world is further damaged by greenhouse gas emissions which will warm the globe by 0.2-0.5°C, and may cause oceans to rise 3cm to 10cm every decade.

We are not spared and may face severe consequences as we are surrounded by seas. We need much emphasis on a pollution-free environment to safeguard nature. Any lackadaisical attitude or ignorance of environmental security may cost us dearly.

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