

CHALLENGES LOOM

DIGITAL HEALTH PASSPORT OPTION FOR TRAVEL BUBBLE

Need to balance safety precautions of closed borders with essential need to travel, say experts

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THE use of a digital health passport, which is being considered by many countries, can serve as risk mitigation to prevent the spread of Covid-19 as the Malaysian government prepares to open its borders through the Reciprocal Green Lane/Travel Corridor Arrangement (RGL/TCA) agreement with Indonesia.

The development came on the heels of the Covid-19 vaccination rollout announced by Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin last week, with 500,000 healthcare staff to be inoculated against the virus in the first phase to begin by the end of February. Health experts, however, said the e-vaccination certificate, as suggested by the World Health Organisation, should not be treated as a perfect solution. Former deputy health minister Dr Lee Boon Chye said such a move would present challenges as data on the duration of the Covid-19 vaccination administered to the recipients before they could be allowed to travel were unavailable.

"The desire for international travel is still strong despite the ongoing pandemic. Hence, there is a need to study options to enable safe international travel.

"It would also depend on how successful our vaccination programme is. If most Malaysians are vaccinated and prevented from falling ill due to Covid-19, then border control can be min-

imal," he said. He, however, said it was premature to have the RGL with Indonesia until the pandemic was under control or until mass vaccination.

Former Malaysian Medical Association president Datuk Dr N.K.S. Tharmaseelan said while he welcomed the RGL, Indonesia should not be the first priority because the pandemic was still rampant. He said there was a need to balance safety precautions of closed borders with the essential need to travel.

"We should have begun with China, Taiwan, (South) Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand first. Singapore just suspended the RGL arrangement with Malaysia."

China had made it mandatory for its citizens leaving the country to be vaccinated, said.

Dr Tharmaseelan questioned the need for the RGL when the country continued to record four-digit cases daily, saying that tourists could potentially be the highest Covid-19 risk group.

"We must create a safe atmosphere for travel in Malaysia for Malaysians before opening up. The tourist dollars are necessary, but so are the health and lives of Malaysians. Why allow a potential risk into the country?"

He said to ensure the safety of incoming and residing individuals, travellers must complete preventative measures to indicate their good health standing, such as providing official documentation declaring the traveller free from Covid-19 or being subject to further testing upon arrival at the designated country.

Some countries are mulling the use of digital health passports to aid in the reopening of borders, with WHO looking at e-vaccination certificates. The World Economic Forum and the Commons Project Foundation had, last year, launched the CommonPass platform under the Common Trust Network to create a common international standard for passengers as proof they do not have Covid-19.



An airplane about to land at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang last Tuesday. PIC BY MOHD FAZLI HANZAH

Experts, associations back health passport

KUALA LUMPUR: Public health experts and tourism associations have expressed support for Malaysia to introduce a health passport as part of the travel requirements for domestic and international tourists.

A health passport refers to documents that certify a person is unlikely to either catch or spread an infectious disease.

The proposed certificate would attest that the holder has been vaccinated, tested negative for the virus or recovered from it.

Manipal University College Malaysia Community and Occupational Medicine Professor Dr G. Jayakumar said the health

passport must factor in three key challenges.

"Firstly, it is too early to know if Covid-19 vaccines can provide long-term immunity against the virus. So, the health passport may give a false sense of security to travellers, resulting in them becoming complacent with practising preventive measures.

"Secondly, a non-vaccinated person who has been tested negative for Covid-19 can still contract the virus after taking the test. Hence, health passports based on negative test results have a short shelf life.

"Thirdly, although it is rare, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has suggested that people who have recovered from Covid-19 infection could get reinfected again. Therefore, this raises questions on the passport's scientific grounding," he told the *New Straits Times*.

He said it could take time for people around the world to be inoculated and obtain universal

herd immunity.

"So, wealthier countries are likely to benefit from early vaccination and, therefore, their people will be allowed to travel first. The disparity between the freedoms permitted to health passport holders versus non-holders could be deemed unfair."

Nevertheless, he said Malaysia could consider introducing a health passport requirement in Southeast Asia if conditions were met.

"We need to ensure the vaccination rates for Asean countries are high enough for travellers to enter individual countries.

"Malaysia will have to look at the infectivity rate of each of the countries to implement mutually accepted health passports.

"Countries with higher Covid-19 infection rates should be excluded from the plan first. At the same time, the testing system in each host country should match international standards," he said. Epidemiologist and biostatisti-

cian Associate Professor Dr Malina Osman said WHO would be the best authority to issue the health passport as part of its International Health Regulations.

"Otherwise, disputes will arise between countries regarding the certification standards used by different regulatory bodies to issue their respective health passports.

"However, it may take time for WHO to implement this new regulation.

"But, at the regional level, we can introduce similar procedures as a travel requirement for Asean countries under the Asean Health Ministers' Meeting's purview," she said.

Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents president Datuk Tan Kok Liang said Asean countries must agree to adopt uniform health and safety protocols before introducing the health passports.

"The key concern is getting all Asean governments to accept the same certification, procedures,

conditions and protocols for entry, and also the airlines carrying those travellers to approve the same certification to allow them to fly.

"The health passports suggestion is also a good solution to replace mandatory quarantine and spur cross-border travel within the region," he said.

Tan, who is Federation of Asean Travel Associations president, said Asean countries must boost cooperation and devise a regional framework for cross-border travel.

On Feb 6, Malaysian Inbound Tourism Association president Uzaidi Udanis told the NST that health authorities should introduce a Covid-19 health

passport when Malaysia's tourism industry reopens post-pandemic.

He suggested that the health passport could model the Yellow Card (Carta Jaune) issued by WHO to certify that a person had been vaccinated against infectious diseases, such as cholera, yellow fever and rubella.



Professor Dr G. Jayakumar



Associate Professor Dr Malina Osman