

Address cyber threats in post-pandemic era - Hishammuddin

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Senior Defence Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein said defence and security must always be constantly aware of any potential threats from biological attacks. - NSTP/ASYRAF HAMZAH

KUALA LUMPUR: The Covid-19 pandemic has forced the world leaders and governments to think outside the box in an effort to manage the ripple effects of the virus.

Senior Defence Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein said defence and security must always be constantly aware of any potential threats from biological attacks.

"The idea of a virus being weaponised may seem like the plot of a Hollywood movie, yet biological attacks are still a threat that we must seriously address them.

"Surely it is a lesson from the pandemic that we in the defence and security field must be cognisant of," said Hishammuddin in his keynote address at the Putrajaya Forum at the Malaysia International Trade and Exhibition Centre (MITEC) in Dutamas.

The event was held in conjunction with the biennial 'Defence Services Asia (DSA) 2022 and National Security Conference Asia (NATSEC) 2022'.

Hishammuddin said amid a globalised world where economies, communities, security and stability of the countries are inter-dependent of each other, sudden lockdowns and travel restrictions had devastating effects globally.

"Ironically, in the process of protecting the lives of our people, it came at the cost of their livelihoods. Even to this very day, we are still trying to rebuild and recover from the devastating impacts of the pandemic.

"Despite the virus, the chaos it has wrought, and despite the millions of lives it has claimed, we have prevailed and made it this far," he said.

Hishammuddin said he believed that part of the success was through a shared sense of responsibility.

"It is vital that we continue working together, especially as leaders in the defence sphere. I am pleased that we in Asean have been working hand-in-hand, sharing our best practices and are now able to come to mutual understandings on ways to implement travel bubbles and travel lanes, as vaccination improves over time."

Hishammuddin also expressed his appreciation and deepest gratitude on behalf of all Malaysians to the frontliners of the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Especially to members of the Malaysian Armed Forces and other law enforcement agencies such as the police, Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency and the People's Volunteer Corps (Rela), who have made sacrifices that most of us may not be able to make had we been in their shoes.

"Truly, I am not only saying this because it is on paper. In fact, they are here -- participating in 'DSA and NATSEC 2022'.

"All of you can visit their booths and see their efforts for yourself," he told them,

Hishammuddin reflected on how Malaysians appreciated the sight of their uniformed personnel together at checkpoints, standing side-by-side in the heat and rain and enforcing the now abolished Movement Control Order.

"It will forever be etched in our memories," he said.

"The negative impact of the pandemic on our economies which affected our budgets has now forced us to take a step back and look at how we can achieve our long-term plans," he said.

He also recalled when borders were completely closed at the start of Covid-19 and that the Malaysian Armed Forces and other law enforcement agencies shored up border defences through the National Task Force (NTF) and 'Op Benteng' to curb illegal entry of immigrants.

"Now that we have announced the reopening of our borders, how shall we go about addressing this issue and other transboundary crime from resuming, or even rising in a post-pandemic era?" he asked.

Hishammuddin said a significant amount of time and efforts were also focused on addressing real, tangible and physical threats.

"Insurgents, kidnappers and traffickers are threats that we can visually identify or otherwise easy to classify, but it is obvious that having learned the hard lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic, we are now paying better attention to the threats that we cannot see.

"On that note, I would like to address one specific threat that exists in the cyber realm."

He said at the height of the pandemic, digital applications such as MySejahtera were used to monitor the health and safety of our people.

"Applications that keep track of our movements, personal details such as date of birth or identity card numbers, contact details and health records. Information that was previously considered private and sensitive are now 'data', stored in the public domain servers which we cannot see and have very little control over.

"It begs the question, what happens if a cyber criminal manages to gain access to these information? Has the guarantee for our health and safety come at the cost of our privacy and security?" he asked.

These, he said, were some pertinent questions which he hoped the Putrajaya Forum would address, deliberate and hopefully formulate suggested solutions for them to take back to our respective nations.

"It would be somewhat out-of-place for me as Malaysia's Senior Defence Minister to not address regional issues of common concern," he said.