

# Malaysia: plan for mass arrest of undocumented migrants

Home Minister Hamzah blasted by two groups of MPs

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## **Two groups consisting of MPs and other elected officials have lambasted Home Minister Hamzah Zainudin over a planned joint operation to arrest undocumented migrants.**

Set to be conducted by the Immigration Department, National Registration Department (NRD) and police during the two-week lockdown, they will detain undocumented foreign workers.

“It is unacceptable that the government still considers the option of mass arrests and imprisonments as a viable option to control the Covid-19 pandemic, especially when more than 109 countries have followed the evidence and implemented decongestion measures and alternatives to incarceration.

“We remain behind despite making initial progress,” said the All Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia for the Reform of Prisons and All Places of Detention (APPGM) group.

It includes deputy speaker Azalina Othman Said, Senator Liew Chin Tong, Permatang Pauh MP Nurul Izzah Anwar, Batang Lupar MP Rohani Binti Abdul Karim and Sepang MP Mohd Azis Jamman as well as public health expert Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman and lawyer Sangeet Kaur Deo.

“Have we forgotten the past painful experience of the third wave in September 2020 culminating from prison clusters in Sabah?

“Have we forgotten the tens of thousands of Covid-19 cases over the past few months and currently happening in prisons across the country, threatening the lives of people in prison, prison staff, their families, and our communities at large?” asked APPGM.

This followed conflicting messages from the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government on the issue of the handling of undocumented migrants.

On Feb 16, Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Khairy Jamaluddin said that undocumented foreign nationals [will not be arrested](#) when they come forward for Covid-19 vaccinations, adding that this assurance was crucial in achieving herd immunity.

He said that the government would work with various groups including employers, NGOs and foreign embassies to encourage foreign workers and refugees to register for the vaccine.

However, on Saturday, Hamzah took a hardline stance saying that law enforcers are prepared to [make more arrests](#) against those found flouting Covid-19 standard operating procedures (SOPs) during the latest movement control order (MCO) beginning June 1.

He said this will include arrests at sea and at illegal routes to stop the entry of undocumented

migrants. There will be joint inspections on migrant settlements nationwide as well.

“SOP compliance must be enhanced, particularly at illegal routes used as migrant landing points.

“As for the Immigration Department, we have discussed, there must be joint operations with the NRD because we feel it has been a year of various SOPs and MCOs... if there are those still stubborn, I mean the migrants, we will arrest them, we will make sure prisons are ready,” said Hamzah, who added that steps were being taken to boost capacity at prisons and immigration detention centres.

The bipartisan group was not impressed with Hamzah’s reasoning, saying that adding new people to temporary prisons spreads limited resources even more thinly and against expert advice as well as global evidence.

“Not only is it counterproductive to our overall effort to stem the transmission of the virus, but it can further endanger the public by creating new hotbeds of Covid-19 clusters.

“No walls can contain any virus,” they said, arguing that Hamzah’s proposed move would be counterproductive.

A separate group of 16 elected officials including former ministers Maszlee Malik and Mujahid Yusof Rawa also chided Hamzah over his proposal.

“Hamzah’s announcement comes as a complete shock and is embarrassing for the government.

“The international community will see that the workings of the PN government are such that the right hand is working against the left hand.

“We agree with the position taken by Khairy on this issue which not only protects migrant workers but also Malaysians at the same time,” they said in a joint statement.

Aside from the duo, the statement was also signed by parliamentarians R Sivarasa, Maria Chin Abdullah, Kasthuri Patto, Charles Santiago, Chan Ming Kai, Hasanuddin Mohd Yunus, Hassan Karim, Amiruddin Hamzah, Natrah Ismail, Sim Tze Sin and a number of elected state representatives.

“There are approximately 3 million undocumented migrant workers in Malaysia (and it could be more) with about 2-3 million documented workers. As long as large numbers of them remain unvaccinated, it will prove difficult to achieve herd immunity needed to protect Malaysian lives.

“It is shocking that Hamzah as a senior minister fails to understand such a basic policy in respect of protecting Malaysians from Covid-19 through vaccination,” said Maszlee’s group.

The APPGM pointed out that equally detrimental to public health is that locking up undocumented migrants would also create a climate of fear that would deter the most vulnerable from volunteering to be vaccinated.

“Without their participation in the national vaccine programme, achieving herd immunity will be elusive.

“Thus, our country will continue to be very susceptible to new variants and mutations of the virus, while wasting billions and human resources to curtail the spread,” they said.

The group stated that it stands firm with scientific evidence, and implores the government to learn

from past experiences so as to not repeat the same mistakes.

“We can no longer afford the same mistakes. The government must reconsider its suggestion of detaining undocumented migrants and, instead, focus on efforts to reduce prison overcrowding,” they added.

In the same vein, they urged the government to consider alternative measures to imprisonment for all MCO offences.

“It is time for the government to seriously rethink its punitive measures and accept that Covid-19 requires a health approach.”

The APPGM said it was relieved to hear that soon after Hamzah’s statement, Khairy revealed that he would be [discussing the proposal](#) of mass detentions of migrants with the home minister.

It expressed hope for a positive outcome.

Similarly, Maszlee’s group called on the premier to step in and address this dispute as it is a critical issue that needs to be resolved immediately.

“We call upon the prime minister to resolve the contradiction in policy created by Hamzah.

“The prime minister should issue a statement as to what exactly is the government’s policy on vaccination for undocumented migrant workers.

“He should also assure there will be protection for all migrants and refugees who are willing to come forward to be vaccinated,” they said.

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