

At COVID 'breaking point' Malaysia declares emergency lockdown

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Malaysia has declared an 'emergency' as millions of people in Kuala Lumpur prepare for another lockdown. (Photo: Reuters)

Kuala Lumpur, January 12 (RHC)-- Malaysia declared a state of emergency on Tuesday morning, hours before millions of Malaysians were due to go back into lockdown following a surge in coronavirus cases that threatened to overwhelm the country's public health system.

A statement from the royal palace said the king had agreed to a declaration of emergency following a Monday meeting with Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin in view of the escalating pandemic and its pressure on the public health system. The emergency will remain in force until August 1, or earlier if COVID-19 cases fall, the statement said.

The statement did not elaborate on what the emergency would entail although previous emergencies have involved the suspension of parliament. On Monday evening, Muhyiddin announced a lockdown from midnight (13:00 GMT) in eight states and federal territories. These include Kuala Lumpur and the states of Sabah, Selangor, Penang and Johor where the lockdown will remain in force for two weeks until January 26.

"Our hospitals are at breaking point," Muhyiddin said in a televised address without mentioning he had earlier requested a state of emergency to be declared. He will give an address on the emergency at 11am (03:00 GMT).

Malaysia brought an earlier wave of COVID-19 under control with a strict three-month lockdown under which people were mostly prevented from leaving their homes and gradually eased curbs as cases dwindled. In July last year, authorities announced zero new cases of local transmission.

But the situation began to change in September after an election in the Borneo state of Sabah at a time when cases had already started to increase. Restrictions on movement were imposed again in October, when Muhyiddin's previous request for an emergency was denied, but cases continued to rise as restaurants, shops and other businesses continued to operate and rules were gradually relaxed to allow travel and larger gatherings.

Daily cases have been above 2,000 since the start of the year and breached 3,000 last week. Malaysia now has more active cases of the coronavirus than the Philippines, and some 187 people are in intensive care with 87 people needing ventilation. The 15 government hospitals designated to treat COVID-19 patients have already filled 70 percent of available beds, with some intensive care units already full.

Muhyiddin formed a government in early March after a power grab led to the resignation of then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

He has faced continued pressure to prove his support in parliament amid criticism of his administration's handling of the pandemic and calls for new elections from some within the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the biggest party in his ruling alliance.

Muhyiddin is currently thought to have the support of 110 members of the 222 seat house. Parliament is expected to be suspended as a result of the emergency declaration.

"The declaration of a state of emergency seems like another attempt by Muhyiddin to hold on to power, block elections and remove parliamentary oversight, rather than to seriously address the pandemic," said Josef Benedict, a researcher with rights group CIVICUS Monitor. "A dark day for democracy."

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