

Remarks by Minister Lawrence Wong, Co-chair of the Multi-Ministry Taskforce on COVID-19, at Press Conference on COVID-19 at National Press Centre on 9 April 2020

Part 1

Good evening everyone. Let me just say a few words on the foreign worker dormitory issue.

We have had foreign worker cases before, including cases in dormitories. But this time, it is different, because there are many more venues outside of the dormitories, as Director of Medical Services said – like Mustafa and the Project Glory construction site, where the workers had either gathered together or worked together. And that is where the virus had spread amongst them. And then when they went back to their respective dorms, they transmitted it back to their fellow workers in these dormitories.

Many had very mild symptoms, and so they continued to work, and that is why there was a delay in picking them up. It is very likely that the virus spread had been going around for some time in the dormitories, and we are now seeing all the indicators of it.

So when we look at the situation in Singapore, I think it is important to realise and recognise that we are dealing with two separate infections – there is one happening in the foreign worker dormitories, where the numbers are rising sharply, and there is another in the general population where the numbers are more stable for now.

That is why we need a different strategy – a dedicated strategy – for our foreign worker dormitories, because there is a greater spread of the virus in these dormitories, and there is also higher transmission rates given the large numbers of workers living in close quarters.

This is a very major and urgent issue that requires active intervention, and that is why at the taskforce level, we decided to put in more resources and to set up a dedicated taskforce focusing on the foreign worker dormitories; we are enlisting help from the whole of Government, including the Singapore Armed Forces and the Singapore Police Force.

As far as the Ministerial Taskforce is concerned, we are also tapping on other people to assist us. The Taskforce at Ministerial level already has DPM Heng as our advisor. But for this particular work in dealing with the foreign worker dormitories, we have invited Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean to help advise and guide us. Given his experience, and that the SAF and Police Force are involved in this work, his involvement has been very useful and helpful.

What are we doing for foreign worker dormitories? There are two parts to our strategy.

First, ensure effective management across all dormitories. That is where the SAF, the Police are leaning forward, working with the Ministry of Manpower and the dorm operators to put in place proper management across all the dormitories, given the current situation. That means taking care of the workers' daily needs and their well-being – all of them now have to stay in the dormitories, so we have to take care of very basic issues like cleanliness, hygiene, food delivery to each one of them. At the same time, making sure all the safe-distancing measures we have put in place are fully complied with, which means ensuring that we minimise the movement of workers and minimise inter-mingling of workers.

That is the first key strategy: effective management. We cannot rely solely on dormitory operators anymore, given the current situation. The Government is leaning forward, working with them, ensuring effective management.

Second, ensuring effective public health measures are in place. As DMS said, this means deploying medical posts in the dorms, starting with the critical ones but eventually scaling up to all the dorms; actively screening and testing workers, and then separating those that are infected or the suspect cases from those that are healthy. To do all these well, we will need to reduce the number of workers in each dorm so that the situation is more manageable.

We are moving out workers who are not sick, especially for those who are in essential services, because they still need to continue to work; so we are moving them out – those that are not sick and in essential services – and we are accommodating them in alternative venues.

We have activated a few alternative sites including SAF military camps, Changi Exhibition Centre – that is the one where we organise ~~aerospace~~ the Airshow, floatels (floating hotels) – these are typically used for offshore accommodation, as well as a few vacant HDB blocks. These will be alternative sites where we can pull out workers that are not sick and that need to continue to work for essential services, and accommodate them in these alternative venues.

In these alternative sites, we will also ensure sound management and public health measures, as what we are doing in all of the dorms. Essentially, we are sparing no effort to contain the spread of the virus in the foreign worker dormitories. We have a responsibility for these foreign workers, who have come all the way here at considerable expense to make a living in Singapore. We will do our part and we will do our very best to take care of them and ensure their safety and their well-being.

Despite our best efforts at containing the situation, all of us have to be mentally prepared that the numbers in the foreign worker dormitories will continue to rise in the coming days and perhaps even in the coming week or so. This will happen before they start to stabilise, but we do have a comprehensive strategy and measures are in place, and the agencies are now working round the clock to execute and implement them.

Thank you.

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Part 2

Remember I said we are dealing with two infections – we have dealt with the foreign worker dormitories, but within the rest of our population outside the dormitories, we have the circuit breaker in place.

I think if you go out along the streets now, or if you are outside, you can see that there is clearly a visible difference. Many people have complied with the instructions – they are staying at home and going out only for essential activities; and when they go out, many are wearing a mask.

We are going to enforce the rules very strictly because there are still, unfortunately, people who are not following the instructions, and there are still some hotspots in Singapore. We know where they are, and we are focusing on these hotspots, and enforcing the rules very tightly.

We have more than 2,500 enforcement officers now out and about. First offence, they will give you a written warning. Second offence, there will be a composition fine. Third offence, you will be prosecuted and there may be a jail sentence.

So the enforcement agencies are going all out to enforce these rules very strictly, and we hope that Singaporeans will comply, not just because of the enforcement efforts that are

ongoing; but out of a real necessity for all of us to do our part, and ensure that this circuit breaker truly has an impact in controlling the spread of the virus.

Even as we do all these, we are continuing to review the circuit breaker measures that we have put in place. There are some places which we have allowed originally under the circuit breaker rules, but we are still seeing people gathering in these places.

For example, we had kept stadiums open because we thought this would be an avenue where people going out to exercise can exercise in these stadiums without bunching together. But yet, unfortunately, we do see people coming in groups to exercise in the stadium, which was not what the intention was.

We have decided, from henceforth, to close stadiums altogether, because if there is no compliance and if these venues continue to be used for congregation of groups, then we cannot allow that to continue. So, we are going to close stadiums altogether.

The basic point is this – we are not stopping people from going out to exercise, but if you want to exercise, do it by yourself or do it with a family member that is already living with you; and do it in your own neighbourhood. Do not go out to a special place outside, drive, make a special trip just to exercise. Minimise movement; minimise travel. Do what you need to do within your own local neighbourhood. Do not exercise in groups, do not jog in groups, do not cycle in groups – any such activities would be an offence.

Let us be quite clear once again about what this circuit breaker means. It really requires all of us to minimise movement and stay at home as much as possible, so that we do not become the weakest link that causes another large cluster to emerge. We are already having to deal with foreign worker dormitory clusters; let us not have more clusters emerge outside of that in our own community as well.

And to do that, all of us really need to do our part. We are continuing to enforce, and review the rules; over the coming days, as we monitor movement, we may very well have to tighten up some more, so that the circuit breaker will truly be effective and all the efforts and sacrifices that Singaporeans are making over this coming month will eventually pay off.