KEMENTERIAN SAINS, TEKNOLOGI DAN INOVASI
MINISTRY OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

PRESS STATEMENT
(IN REPLY TO YBM TENGKU RAZALEIGH HAMZAH)

There has been a 'statement' that has gone viral recently by the Gua Musang Member of Parliament, YBM Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, on the recent deal between the Government of Malaysia and Pfizer for the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines. Upon clarification with his office, I was told that the statement has not been officially released but indeed comes from the Gua Musang MP. Since the statement has not been retracted, has been shared widely, quoted in the media, and referred to in parliamentary debate, I will assume that it is now in the public domain and subject to the right of reply. And since the Gua Musang MP's statement contains a lot of baseless allegations, misrepresentations, and wrong facts, I feel they must be answered in detail.

The statement alleges that the Pfizer deal is rumoured to cost the government more than RM 2 billion. It also alleges that the government will bear an additional cost of RM 1 billion just to store and distribute the vaccine. This statement further alleges that the Malaysian government has used up the entire allocation of RM 3 billion to cover just 20 percent of the population.

As I mentioned in Parliament on 7 December 2020, this amount is simply not true. I am not sure where the Gua Musang MP plucked this number from, but it has no basis whatsoever.

According to his statement, the deal with Pfizer costs RM 3 billion (RM 2 billion for the vaccines and RM 1 billion for transport and storage), hence the cost is RM 234 per dose. This is simply ludicrous. Although I cannot reveal the exact price for the Pfizer vaccine which is bound by a non-disclosure agreement, I have mentioned previously in my reply to YB Ronnie Liu that the cost is significantly less than RM100 per dose, which includes delivery to multiple points of vaccination.

As for Malaysia's ultra-cold capabilities, also previously mentioned in my reply to YB Ronnie Liu, we already have -80 degree Celsius freezers all over the country. For instance, our public universities and public research institutions have more than 125 ultra-cold freezers. If these freezers cannot be redeployed, we will make arrangements for the procurement of additional ultra-cold freezers.

Based on our current negotiations to acquire a portfolio of vaccines, we are still within our estimate of RM 3 billion to acquire enough doses to cover 70% of our population.

The Pfizer deal clearly has not used up the entire allocation as recklessly alleged by the Gua Musang MP.

The statement also says that there are experts who feel that we should consider alternatives to the vaccine to end the pandemic. The statement refers to Dr Mike Yeadon, a former VP of Pfizer, who says that we do not need vaccines as people are acquiring natural herd immunity.

Attempting to acquire natural herd immunity will simply mean a lot of people will get sick, pushing our healthcare system beyond its limit. Even though our healthcare capacity is sufficient to handle the present number of positive cases, we must do everything possible to protect people from getting sick and needlessly losing lives. Allowing people to get sick and possibly die is extremely irresponsible.

I would like to point out to the Gua Musang MP that Dr. Yeadon's views have been marked as inaccurate under Health Feedback, which is a member of the WHO-led project Vaccine Safety Net (VSN). The VSN consists of a diverse group of websites that provides vaccine safety information in various languages. Each of these websites has been evaluated by WHO and meets the criteria for good information practices.

Perhaps the Gua Musang MP would like to check the veracity of the sources he quotes when preparing a statement.

The statement also says that the three most important criteria of a vaccine are safety, safety, and safety.

The Government takes the issue of safety very seriously. One of the main objectives of the first two phases of clinical trials is safety. Every vaccine must pass these two phases and must be proven safe before they can enter phase three.

Again, I reiterate, we take this issue very seriously. We will ensure that all the vaccines we procure are safe, efficacious, and stable. All vaccines will need to be approved and registered by the National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency (NPRA) before vaccinations start in Malaysia, and we have some of the most rigorous standards in the world. There will be no corners cut in NPRA's independent evaluation of the clinical data.

The statement also questions the effectiveness of the vaccine, and why it had to be fast-tracked. It also states that during clinical trials, there were side effects such as muscle pain, chills, and headaches.

At the moment, none of the vaccines in phase 3 trials have sufficient data to demonstrate sterilising immunity which shows that infections can be prevented. More information will be available as trials progress. The data that has been shared, however, shows the vaccines being developed is efficacious in preventing the disease. This is important because the first objective of the vaccination strategy is to prevent people from getting sick or die from COVID-19.

By preventing the disease, we can also possibly slow down infections because there is evidence showing infectivity is highest at the onset of symptoms. It is then hoped that when enough people are vaccinated, herd immunity will be achieved, protecting the remainder of the population that have not been or cannot be given the vaccine.

The development of COVID-19 vaccines has been fast-tracked because of several factors. One of the main reasons is that science and technology has evolved quite significantly over the past decade with new platforms like the mRNA and adenoviral vector-based vaccines. These developments took place before the pandemic and were quickly adapted to develop a vaccine for COVID-19.

Global collaboration has also helped. The speedy release of the SARs-CoV-2 genome in January 2020 helped accelerate the development of vaccines. Finally, it is also because of the unprecedented amount of money that has been invested to develop a vaccine that can help end the global pandemic.

Quoting the WHO Chief Scientist, Dr Soumya Swaminathan, on how it was possible to develop COVID-19 vaccines in record time: “It is not that you are reducing the time of studying safety or efficacy. That is important and that cannot be compromised. But where you can save time is in the procedural aspects, in some of the bureaucratic aspects, and in the manufacturing.”

As for side effects - muscle pain, fever and fatigue are common side effects for many vaccines. Nonetheless, the NPRA will review all safety data independently to ensure the vaccines are safe for use in Malaysia.

The statement has also questioned previous lawsuits against Pfizer.

Information regarding Pfizer’s previous lawsuits are publicly available information. That is for Pfizer to answer.

Our present focus is the safety, efficacy, and stability of their COVID-19 vaccine. That is why we will vigorously defend the independence of the NPRA to assess Pfizer’s clinical data as they make it available before we use the vaccine in Malaysia.

I continue to welcome questions on this very important global and national endeavor to vaccinate as many people as possible.

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