

# **Effect Of Covid-19 Pandemic On Malaysian Security And Development (Kesban): East Coast Economic Region (Ecer) Case Study**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss an approach and actions taken by Malaysian government in facing COVID-19 from the point of view of KESBAN Strategy focus on Malaysian East Coast Economic Region (ECER) as a case studies. This study using qualitative approach by In-depth interviews were conducted with Malaysian Health Ministry (MOH), Malaysian National Security Council (NSC), Malaysian Royal Police (RMP), Malaysian Armed Force (MAF), East Coast Economic Region (ECER), Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang State Economic Planning Unit and National Special Operations Force (Malaysia) to analyze COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on the socio-economic development & security enforcement in ECER on security and health policy documents and reports in order to investigate the roles and practices of the Malaysian security and development agencies during the COVID-19 pandemics. This study finds the crisis has pushed Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang's socio-economic stability into uncertainty. Various issues and challenges have arisen, and those have the potential to impede all ECER development plans and projects. Nevertheless, the government has taken steps to restructure its strategy to prioritise resources for the implementation of strategic and high-impact projects and programmes, as well as to provide optimal benefits for investors and people in the region, allowing them to continue operating and ensuring their survival. On the other hand, from a security perspective, national border control has been strengthened through the integration and collaboration of all related agencies. This measure is critical in preventing any illegal activities, particularly the influx of immigrants who are contributing to the rise in COVID-19 statistics. As a result, security may certainly provide a conducive atmosphere for development purposes. Similarly, development can also strengthen all security factors. Therefore, security and development must be determined to go hand in hand to ensure the sovereignty and stability of a country.

**Keywords-** COVID-19, ECER, KESBAN, Malaysia

## **Introduction**

Worldwide, the corona virus pandemic (COVID-19) has been the primary source of concern for all countries. COVID-19 first appeared in Malaysia on 24 January 2020 where 22 cases were discovered, 12 of which involved individuals who had returned from affected countries and regions. Eight of those individuals were infected from the result of close contacts while two others were infected through a humanitarian mission (World Health Organization, 2020). Since January 2020, the number of positive cases has been increasing. On 16 March 2020, the number of positive cases surpassed 553 cases, and Malaysia's Prime Minister issued a Movement Control Order (MCO), imposing a nation-wide lockdown of all non-essential

services. The initial social isolation was supposed to only last 14 days (18 March to 31 March 2020) to slow the spread of COVID-19 (Sukumaran, 2020), however, the MCO has been in effect even to present day, though the restrictions have been loosened and strengthened based on infection rates.

With over 5,000 to 9,000 new COVID-19 cases per day since May 2021, the social-economic impact of the pandemic in Malaysia is alarming. The Department of Statistics reported that in 2020, Malaysian GDP contracted 5.6 per cent compared to 4.3 per cent in 2019 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). The main reason was a reduction in tourism activities, a halt to air travel, and a decline in social activities because of the implementation of lockdowns. However, the pandemic-induced economic contraction of Malaysia has fared better than its neighbouring countries due to its strong domestic economy. Though the increased demand for labour in various sectors such as manufacturing, construction, and agriculture has dampened further economic contraction, it has also contributed to the influx of illegal foreign workers which have increased the severity of the pandemic in Malaysia (Krishnan T, 2020).

Apart from their efforts to strengthening both the safety and security precautions at the legal entrance points of the country since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Malaysian Government has deployed security forces and enforcement agencies to monitor and deter illegal entrances under the ambit of OP BENTENG and MCO operations. OP BENTENG established nation-wide checkpoints in both land and maritime domains with the cooperation of the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA), the Malaysian Border Security Agency (AKSEM), and the police force. The most prominent areas of illegal immigration occur at the international land and the maritime border of Peninsular Malaysia which have been a "traditional route of incursion" either during peace or pandemic periods. There is no question that illegal immigration has contributed to the increment of the pandemic.

### ***Problem Statement***

The Malaysian Government is now confronted with an economic-security paradox which cannot satisfy the objectives of both. If labour demands are allowed to continue to be met (through less-stringent border control), the pandemic-induced economic contraction will be minimized, yet the pandemic would be prolonged. If the Government imposes greater pandemic restrictions to curtail the spread of COVID-19 (stricter border control measures), the economy would further contract, affecting the social-economic development of Malaysia. Considering these developments, this paper identifies the need to review the effects of COVID-19 on Malaysian security and development, and the challenges faced by the national border security crisis.

### ***Aim of Study***

The aim of this paper is to research the extent of COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on the socio-economic development & security enforcement in ECER. Through research of the Government agencies roles and responsibilities during the pandemic and the KESBAN concept and approach, this paper will identify and analyse the seriousness of socio-economic impacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the effectiveness of the recovery plan imposed by the authoritative bodies.

## Research Objectives

This research has three objectives. First, identify the current COVID-19 pandemic situations in those sub-regions. Second, analyse the development issues and challenges within the study areas during the COVID-19 pandemic periods. Third, analyse the security and enforcement measures in those areas during the current COVID-19 pandemic periods and their prolonged impacts on socio-economic achievements and fourth, propose an action plan to maintain socio-economic development progress without neglecting the security and enforcement precaution during the current COVID-19 pandemic periods.

## Scope of Research

The scopes of the research cover the Eastern Peninsular region under the East Coast Economic Region (ECER), including Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang and focus on the period of the COVID-19 pandemic that occurs from January 2021 until June 2021.

## Conceptual Framework

KESBAN is a Malay portmanteau word that stands for 'Keselamatan dan Pembangunan,' which means security and development. KESBAN can be described as the whole of all government agencies' approach to safeguard and strengthen society in the face of a threat. Internal Security (IS) and Internal Development (IDEV) are the two pillars of the KESBAN concept. The uniformed and armed forces (MAF, RMP, and MMEA) are responsible for the IS aspect, focusing on the whole spectrum of security measures implemented by security forces to defend the country. IDEV on the other hand, involves all civil governmental agencies, with responsibilities for activities that contribute to the welfare of a nation. Balanced development, mobilisation, and neutralisation are the interrelated components of the KESBAN strategy, which is used to contain traditional and non-traditional challenges rather than increasing and jeopardising the nation's security and prosperity (Operations, 2013). Though each element has its own objectives, they all should be coordinated, planned, and implemented coherently for both IS and IDEV. The National Security Policy, National Defence Policy, Defence White Paper, and Security and Public Order Policy are some of the official publications that can be used to examine and analyse Malaysian perspectives on the KESBAN concept.

KESBAN is also one of the strategies used by the American government to combat the insurgents in Afghanistan. Other than just using a military approach in combating Taliban, the Obama administration focused on infrastructure, agriculture, and institution-building which were essential for Afghanistan's political, economic and socio-development. Unfortunately, airstrikes that led to significant civilian casualties, uninvited visits to women at home during night raids, the deployment of dogs during the house searches all failed to win the 'hearts and minds' of the Afghan people. All of them were contradictory to Afghan culture, social values, or religion. As a result, the withdrawal of US troops will surely benefit the political situation in Kabul as a response to Afghanistan's crisis through the Afghan approach. However, if the Afghan Government and Taliban fail to reach an agreement, the Afghan state will lose crucial resources in dealing with Taliban threats (Mason, 2014). Hence, the understanding between the population and the Government is the foundation in the success of the KESBAN concept.

## Research Methodology

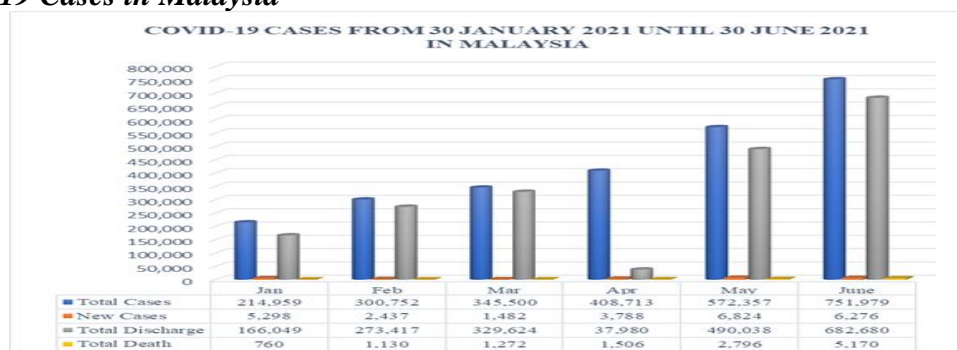
This research takes a qualitative method to examine the issues that the authorities confront in dealing with Malaysia's security and development, particularly the Covid-19 epidemic, which is regarded as the country's most serious security concern. In-depth interviews and document analysis were the two primary research methodologies employed in the study. According to Blaikie (2000), the number of respondents in phenomenal research will be limited since the approach used is an in-depth interview, in which respondents may go to significant lengths to describe or relate their experiences, knowledge, and understanding of the issue under discussion. Various parts of the issue must be thoroughly investigated, which may take a significant amount of time and effort. Creswell (1994) feels that interviewing 5-25 people is adequate to get a comprehensive grasp of their experiences with the subject under investigation. E-mail, letters, and phone calls were used to make a total of 12 connections. Only eight people agreed to the interview. The others rejected due to the delicate nature of the matter, which involves national security. As a result, 8 respondents will be chosen for an in-depth interview. Many security personnel approached declined to be interviewed since this is connected to security matters, some of which entail national security. Some people did not answer at all. Many respondents were similarly concerned when approached, believing that ethical considerations were at stake. Interview was conducted during EX Kajimatan Field Research which involved several Malaysian government agencies such as Malaysian Health Ministry (MOH), Malaysian National Security Council (NSC), Malaysian Royal Police (RMP), Malaysian Armed Force (MAF), East Coast Economic Region (ECER), Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang State Economic Planning Unit and National Special Operations Force (Malaysia). Documentary analysis was carried out on security and health policy documents and reports in order to investigate the roles and practices of the Malaysian security and development agencies during the COVID-19 pandemics. Domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, and constant comparison were used for the analysis of the in-depth interviews and for the documentary data analysis.

## Result

### COVID-19 Pandemic Situation

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Malaysian government has periodically reassessed the established measures, such as the Movement Control Order (MCO), in light of the country's pandemic condition. Despite the government's attempts to avoid it, the number of instances has steadily climbed.

### COVID-19 Cases in Malaysia

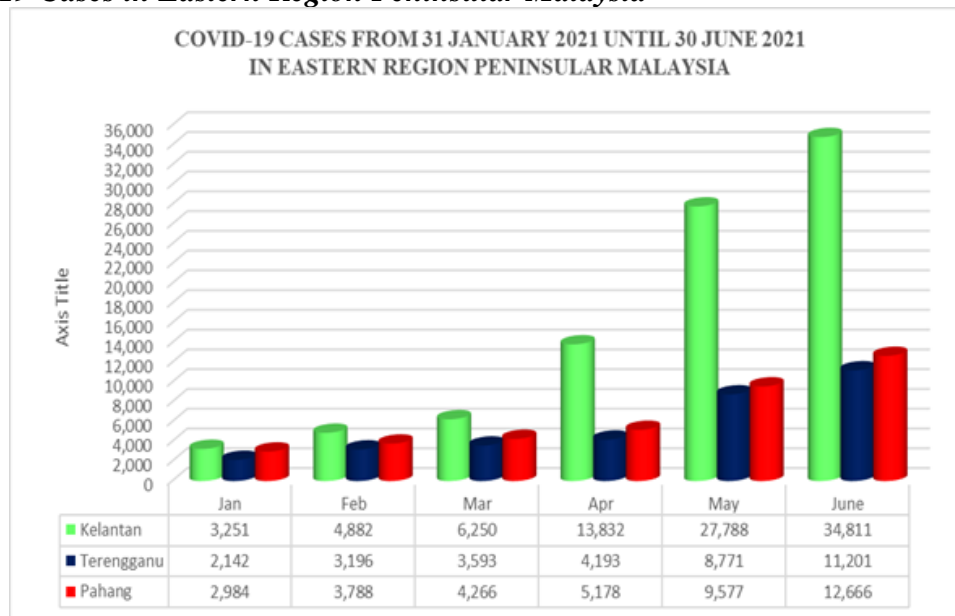


**Figure 1.** The COVID-19 Cases From 30 January 2021 until 30 June 2021 in Malaysia.

**Source :** <http://covid-19.moh.gov.my>

Based on Figure 1, there is a distribution of COVID-19 positive cases from 30 January to 30 June 2021 in Malaysia. Based on these statistics, COVID-19 infections continue to increase month to month even with MCO restrictions.

**COVID-19 Cases in Eastern Region Peninsular Malaysia**



**Figure 2.** The COVID-19 Cases From 30 January 2021 until 30 June 2021 in Eastern Region Peninsular Malaysia.

**Source :** <http://covid-19.moh.gov.my>

Figure 2 shows the increase in COVID-19 cases in the eastern peninsular region of Malaysia from 31 Jan 21 to 30 June 21. Kelantan recorded the highest number of COVID-19 cases with 34,811 cases followed by Terengganu (11,201) and Pahang (12,666). Although Selangor is the highest in terms of the number of COVID-19 infections in the country with more than 1,000 cases a day, the real situation of the pandemic is getting worse and more critical in Kelantan.

**Development Issues And Challenges**

The East Coast Economic Region Development Council (ECERDC) is a legislative organisation charged with directing the execution and implementation of the East Coast Economic Region (ECER) Master Plan. According to Gopalakkrishnan et al. (2021) :

ECERDC plays a lead role in setting the directions, policies, and strategies for the socio-economic development of ECER by promoting and facilitating investments into the Region. ECER, which covers the states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang and the district of Mersing in Johor, is a rapidly transforming region that is steadily positioning itself as a distinctive, dynamic and competitive destination for investments. Geographically, it covers a total area of over 66,000 sq km or 51% of Peninsular Malaysia. It is home to some 4.3 million people, or about 15% of the total national population.

Tourism, oil, gas, and petrochemicals, manufacturing, agribusiness, and human capital development are driving the region's economic growth. These clusters are bolstered by advancements in Social and Human Capital, Transportation, Infrastructure, Property, and the Environment, transforming the Region into a refuge for business, investment, and high-quality

living. The ECER Master Plan, adopted by the Government in 2008, was created as a foundation for ECER growth. It finds initiatives and programmes that will minimise regional socioeconomic gaps, abolish poverty, and increase income and wealth distribution over time. (Bernama, 2021).

### ***Key Development Idea***

The ECER's 7 Key Growth Areas (KDA) or Nodes, as indicated by the ECERDC (2020), have been formed to expedite the Region's development. Each Node symbolises a significant population centre as well as a resource-rich location. These Nodes were created using a focused decentralisation strategy in order to attract private investments into certain locations. This allows the government to make better use of resources in order to further catalyse economic activity in designated regions, with equal focus on rural and urban growth. The dynamic economic ecosystems that have been built in this manner have effectively provided new employment and entrepreneurial possibilities, facilitating rural-urban integration. With this concentrated development strategy, the government may prioritise resources for strategic and high-impact projects and programmes, resulting in maximum advantages for investors and rakyat in the Region. The effective development of these nodes has catalysed growth and revolutionised the region's socioeconomic profile, resulting in the creation of thousands of new employment and entrepreneurial possibilities for local populations. However, many of the initiatives have been pushed back because to the Covid-19 Pandemic.

### ***Ongoing Developments***

Projects or programmes in progress in Kelantan consist of Kampung Laut, the Tumpat Redevelopment (Heritage Tourism Village), Palekbang-Kota Bharu Bridge, Kelar Water Treatment Plant (Phase 2 - Pasir Mas), Tok Bali Integrated Fisheries Park (Construction of Sewage Treatment Plant, Water Tank and Utilities), Tok Bali Industrial Park, Pulau Suri, Tumpat (Redevelopment of Pasar Terapung), Human Capital Development Programme (*empower ECER, entrepreneur ECER, a and the ECER Talent Enhancement Programme (ETEP)*) (ECERDC, 2020).

Projects or programmes in progress in Pahang consist of the Kemaman-Gebeng Water Distribution Pipeline, Taman Negeri Tasik Chini (Water Quality Monitoring System, Lotus Seeding and Reforestation), Pahang islands tourism: Pulau Tioman (Upgrading of Jetty at Kg. Genting and Kg. Salang, Construction of New Bridge at Sg. Mangkai), development of Pantai Hiburan (Rompin), Special Fund for the Former Areas of DARA & LKWJ (Temerloh, Bera, Maran, Jerantut, Pekan and Rompin), Human Capital Development Programmes (*empower ECER, entrepreneur ECER, ECER Talent Enhancement Programme (ETEP)*) (ECERDC, 2020).

Projects or programmes in progress in Terengganu consist of Kuala Terengganu Airport – KTCC Road (3.2km of road upgrading), Dungun Town Coastal Tourism (Teluk Lipat Coastal Protection Works), Terengganu Islands Tourism: Pulau Kapas (Upgrading of Hybrid Solar System), Human Capital Development Programme (*empower ECER, entrepreneur ECER, ECER Talent Enhancement Programme (ETEP)*) (ECERDC, 2020).

Projects or programmes in progress in Johor consist of Mersing Islands Tourism (Pulau Besar – Construction of Pusat Informasi & Perkhidmatan Taman Laut Sultan Iskandar (PIPTLSI) and Pulau Pemanggil – Construction of Jetty), Kampungstay Air Papan Tourism Development at Teluk Buih, Endau-Mersing Fish Processing Park, Jemaluang Dairy Valley, Taman Negara Johor Endau-Rompin (Construction of 'Peta Rainforest Discovery Centre' and

associated facilities), Human Capital Development Programme (*empower ECER, entrepreneur ECER, ECER Talent Enhancement Programme (ETEP)*) (ECERDC, 2020).

The East Coast Economic Region Development Council (ECERDC) has identified three priority areas for economic recovery in order to assist individuals in dealing with the problems posed by the Covid-19 epidemic. Priority was given to human capital development, agricultural, and tourist sectors in order to reduce poverty and revitalise the state's socioeconomic economy. (ECERDC, 2020).

### ***Development Issues***

Malaysia has limited healthcare capacity available. While there is little question that the virus's capacity to spread so swiftly was aided by hyper-globalization, it is not the WHO that supplies hospital beds, physicians, and nurses, nor the World Trade Organization (WTO) that purchases medications, ventilators, and personal protective equipment. These responsibilities are assigned to our domestic institutions. (Wan & Zetty Noor Akmar, 2021).

Never before have governments had to intervene and essentially halt practically all economic activity. The danger on the commerce side is path dependence, which is predicated on the existing policies used to combat Covid-19. Once governments have decided on a course of action, it will have a direct impact on how businesses function. (Gopalakkrishnan et al., 2021).

A lot of businesses face existential threat. Nearly half of the population are at risk of losing their livelihoods. Informal economy workers are particularly vulnerable due to termination and closure of businesses that cannot sustain their operation costs. Without the means to earn an income during lockdowns, many are unable to feed themselves and their families. This significantly hampered economic growth in the eastern coast region. (Tengku Feissal et al., 2021).

Kelantan scores among the lowest vaccination rate compared to other states in Malaysia. As mentioned by Kelantan State Health Chief, Zaini bin Hussini in a cover by The Star, about 340,000 individuals have registered for vaccination, which is still considered low in numbers. To make matters worse, some 10,000 residents had failed to show up for their vaccination appointments. (The Star, 2021).

Kelantan Department of Fisheries highlighted that there is an issue on decreasing capacity of captured fisheries during the pandemic and MCO restriction imposed by the Government. Some fishermen choose not to go to sea even though there is no restriction from the Government. Aside from invasion by foreign vessels, dependency in foreign workers also contribute to this matter. As a result, fish landing amount decreased 26% from 2019 to 2020 in Kelantan alone (Gopalakkrishnan et al., 2021).

Excess fish production in aquaculture cannot be sold in proper prices due to buyers in lockdown. Less buyers translates to less demand, which in turn result to excess of supply. This made prices plummet and cannot promote to healthy economic growth. (Gopalakkrishnan et al., 2021).

The decrease of entrepreneurship of 91% is a tough situation to the economy. People in Terengganu depending mostly on hawking & trading activities. Implementation of MCO series with multiple restrictions poses tough condition for one to start a business. (Tengku Feissal et al., 2021).

Tourism is the 2nd largest contributor to Terengganu economy. With the delay of tourism projects due to the pandemic, tourism industry is facing an unusual challenging time and susceptible to cease of operations. (Tengku Feissal et al., 2021).

### ***Development Challenges***

Natural disaster (flood) during monsoon season in the end of the year poses challenges to complete vaccination programme, which has to be completed by October. Incompletion will only result to slow progress of development projects in Kelantan and Pahang. (Tengku Feissal et al., 2021).

In Terengganu, all new development plans were halted due to COVID-19. Only ongoing projects are continued with progress behind schedule due to the restrictions on minimal workforce and vaccination programme for workers. (Tengku Feissal et al., 2021).

Also, In Terengganu lockdown because of the pandemic has caused a significant impact to the development projects and economy. The Government has to hold to new development projects and put priorities towards the ongoing projects. Focus on tourism development project also has been shifted to agricultural project to sustain food supplies and to revive economic sectors. This is because food production is the largest economic contributor to Terengganu. (Tengku Feissal et al., 2021).

Loss of revenue due to implementation of MCO lockdown may result to insufficient budget allocation to further continue development projects. States in eastern coast of Peninsular Malaysia may need additional economic stimulus package from the federal Government to further achieve respective development plans. (Gopalakkrishnan et al., 2021).

Kelantan government is to educate its people on the importance of getting vaccinated, which will indirectly promote to lesser spread and will subsequently enable economic activities to revive. (Tengku Feissal et al., 2021).

With current pandemic environment, digitalization is one of the ways to minimize risk of virus transmission. Through the use of digital platforms such as MyTravel, My Sejahtera and online shopping platforms, prove to be beneficial to this purpose. Business operators must embrace this method in order to continue operating and ensure their survival. (Gopalakkrishnan et al., 2021).

### ***Security Enforcement And Impact To Socio-Economy***

Since Malaysia's independence, security enforcement in the northern area has been a critical component of the country's socio-economic development. Though the security threat of the communist insurgency has subsided, the northern region of Malaysia still poses non-traditional threats in the modern day (drug smuggling, human trafficking, etc). In 2020, the Malaysian Government formed the National Task Force (NTF) to manage illegal entry to Malaysia to protect the Malay population from the spread of COVID-19 (Krishnan T, 2020). NTF is responsible for developing a plan through the collection of information, coordinating security measures, and monitoring illegal encroachments of the immigrants and undocumented foreign workers at all entrances and border areas of the country, both by land and sea. The main elements that drive this task force are the MAF, the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP), and the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA). Aside from the main three main security enforcement agencies, close cooperation and strong collaboration with other government agencies, such as the Malaysian Immigration Department, Royal Malaysian



Customs, the Civil Defence Agency, the Ministry of Health, and the Malaysian Border Security Agency, have been implemented (Octavian, A., Widjayanto, J., Putra, I. N. et al, 2021).

### ***Non-Traditional Threats***

Environmental, economic, and sociological risks are examples of non-traditional threats. These new types of threats to the northern region of Malaysia's east coast security are connected to the state's growth goals. In terms of environmental security, unregulated infrastructure projects will raise contamination, resource depletion, harm natural animals and forests, and contribute to climate change. On the other hand, underdevelopment would result in slower economic growth and may jeopardise the state's economic security (Azmi, Anwar, Azan and Sofian, 2019). A vulnerability to social security comes if there are ideological or demographic differences that lead to extremism and societal division. Kelantan, Pahang and Terengganu 's current socio-political environment necessitates greater caution on the part of the Federal Government in its actions and development plans.

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### ***State Security Structure and Government Agencies in Relation to Security***

The National Security Council (NSC) oversees the state's security. This involves tackling all state security risks. Currently, the NSC has 23 guidelines that are used to decide the proper reaction to a danger to national defence. The Chief Minister chairs the State Security Council, which also includes members from various legislative and enforcement organisations like as the police and armed forces (Majid, 2021).

The state security system for Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan is generally no different where security and local law enforcement are subject to the Local Authority (PBT). Local authorities are responsible for managing enforcement matters under the Local Government Act enactment while the federal laws enforced in each state are under the jurisdiction and responsibility of the Royal Malaysia Police and assisted by the Malaysian Armed Forces, Malaysia Maritime Enforcement, Customs and Immigration. These agencies all work hand-in-hand that constitutes a Whole-of-Government approach in combatting non-traditional threats and in addressing other threats to state security (Kasim, 2021). These joint efforts lead to sharing of information among agencies, coordination of tasks and function to avoid duplication and utilisation of resources and unity of command as in all directives are from the top-level representatives from the State Security Council to the lower levels.

Though the NSC has provided guidelines to the government agencies to tackle state security risks, with the nature of both traditional and non-traditional threats encompassing all aspects of Malaysian security, agencies have compartmentalized their agency's responsibilities without a unity of effort across all agencies. Evident by discussions of government agencies, most agencies are efficient at countering either security or development issues, yet most agencies cannot elaborate how their efforts are related to both security and development. One

exception was the Department of Irrigation and Drainage where they were able to link the development issues of building efficient drainage systems to not only provide better living conditions for its citizens, but also to enhance border patrols for security forces along the Thai-Malaysia border.

### ***Impact to Socio-Economy***

Since the COVID pandemic, the whole country has hampered the government's efforts to sustain and increase the country's socio-economy. Most of the trade, both domestic and foreign, had to be stopped in order to curb the spread of the pandemic. As a result, the socio-economic structure of the country is affected to some extent, but it does not weaken the country's security and defence systems which is running as usual. In fact, the security system was enhanced when the COVID-19 epidemic was spreading where the government had implemented Op Benteng which was implemented in an integrated manner by MAF, RMP, MMEA and other government public agencies to prevent foreigners from entering the country. The internal security system was also enhanced by conducting large-scale joint patrols of the MAF and RMP to ensure that the SOPs were complied with and at the same time the crime rate was found to be declining (Majid, 2021).

### ***Environmental Security***

It is likely that the ECER development will bring a negative impact towards the environmental security of these 3 states. The wildlife and forestry department of Kelantan acknowledged this fact since the development is currently constructed by demolition of the forest areas which causes the natural habitat of wildlife in the area to be disrupted. With flooding (last major flood occurred in December 2020) a particular issue for Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang states, environmental security is an important issue for the development of the social-economy of the northern region. This would lead to the demise on many species of wild animals and hence lead to disturbance of the ecosystem and the food chain. Subsequently, these development projects can lead to issues revolving around food security if no mitigation or remedial action to counter these negative effects are taken by the authorities. Kelantan has the highest percentage of households of any Malaysian state with no access to running water and development can further hinder water security if left unregulated (Chung 2021). Smuggling of wild animal products still occurs even in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has resulted in challenges for the security forces for MAF especially in the Thailand-Malaysia border area where members are forced to implement SOPs while carrying out operations. However, operations were not affected due to SOPs and even border operations were enhanced from time to time with the assistance of the NTF and other government public agencies (Assha'ari, 2021).

### ***Societal/Human Security***

The ECER development will bring about positive changes in the aspect of societal security. The development of these facilities will increase state income and national economy. Infrastructure in the vicinity of populated areas including medical facilities, schools, public facilities which also will be fully equipped with basic amenities such as fresh water supply and electricity. Since the development will provide connectivity between urban and rural areas, this will ensure that people are closer to all these public facilities that will enhance the quality of life and provide a sense of security to their livelihood (Faziharudean, 2021). In addition, bringing development to the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia will also transform the lives and culture of the indigenous people, however, the consequence of all this on their livelihood is difficult to assess.

Societal security in the COVID-19 pandemic is more challenging due to the lack of public exposure especially to this threat especially for the rural population. The RMP had to implement methods of exposure to the dangers of COVID-19 and preventive measures such as social isolation and ban on gathering to prevent the pandemic from continuing to occur. The crime rate in this pandemic era is seen to be declining on societal security due to the enforcement of roadblocks by the RMP and MAF as well as the integrated patrols of the RMP with the MAF (Haris, 2021). Aggressive prevention and legal action systems have to some extent succeeded in lowering crime rates especially in developing areas. However, there are some cases of civil crimes committed by locals and it is not a serious threat to the country.

### ***Economic Security***

Economic recessions can lead to high unemployment rates, increased poverty, and failed businesses. It could also challenge essential services and businesses from continuing to provide their products and services to the public which would lead to instability and chaos. Therefore, the ECER project is likely to serve as a high multiplier to the state's economy which would entail a higher revenue or GDP for the state. The ECER represents over 30% of agricultural input for Malaysia which have helped reduce poverty rates (Alam 2019). As we are all aware, the current COVID-19 virus pandemic has resulted in one of the worst economic recessions the global markets have witnessed. This has caused a serious threat to the global economy where nations are resorting to using federal reserves to keep the economy going.

### ***Current COVID-19 Intervention by the Government***

The Federal Government is responsible to proposed and enforce regulations to counter the COVID-19 threat, while the state governments assist and follow the action plan of the federal government. Currently, all three northern states are in the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of "Pelan Pemulihan Negara" (PPN) or the National Recovery Plan that the federal government is implementing from 5 July 2021. More than ten percent of these States' populations have been vaccinated to date and are expected to achieve its objective by October 2021.

In phase 2 of PPN, there are still many restrictions enforced in terms of lockdowns, but most development programs, especially the building sectors, are allowed to continue. With the 2<sup>nd</sup> Phase of PPN enforced, most socio-development programs will still be affected, and Phase 3 onwards is when most programs can be continued (Tengku Feissal et al., 2021). According to Kelantan RMP, "Operasi Patuh" (OP Patuh) or the COVID-19 SOP compliance operations is part of the effort to ensure the community is safe from infections (Abd Ghani & Kasim, 2021). The RMP added that it is a challenge to ensure the rural communities comply with the SOP, but effort to educate the community has helped.

### ***Comparison with others in COVID-19 Intervention***

The UK is one of the countries greatly affected by COVID-19 because of the easing of restrictions but has recovered tremendously since the roll out of vaccines in Dec 2020. According to (Sasse et al., 2021), the UK vaccination program was one of the fastest efforts of any nation and is part of the critical success in reducing the effects of COVID-19 on their healthcare system. The UK's initial COVID-19 interventions are similar to Malaysia, including lockdowns, mask mandates, testing, and isolating infected people through quarantine. After the roll-out of the vaccine in Dec 2020, they ramped up the vaccination program while doing contact tracing to isolated infected people. After three months, they manage to start lifting the lockdowns in phases while continuing the effort of vaccination, contact tracing and isolating infected people.

According to the Director-General of the Ministry of Health Malaysia, Noor Hisham Abdullah (2021) the same strategy from the UK was applied in Labuan. In July this year, the cases in Labuan were very high, up to 1340 in a week, and vaccination was rammed up rapidly, resulting in a decrease of cases after two weeks. He also added that data from the locally infected front liners who had already been vaccinated showed that the effects of COVID-19 were minimal after two complete two complete doses of the vaccine were administered (MOH, 2021a). It is a clear indication that the Government effort in addressing the COVID-19 issues is similar to the UK that has successfully opened-up all of its sectors without compromising its healthcare environment.

At this time, the Covid cases in the east region are less than the Kelang Valley. The combined case in Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang on the 15 July 2021 was about 700, while the combined cases in Kelang Valley was more than 7000. The government effort is different where the vaccine was concentrated to Kelang Valley with around 200,000 daily doses compared to the east region around 30,000 daily doses (MOH, 2021b). From this, we can see that the government is handling the situation with a concentrated approach towards the highly infected areas.

### ***Suggestion Action Plan***

All three State Economic Development Units agreed that the main challenge for socio-economic development programs are the lockdowns enforced by the federal government (Tengku Feissal et al., 2021). The only way for the development programs to continue is to open all sectors. However, it would be problematic to the healthcare system as it is challenging to ensure the compliance of SOP in the workplace and public areas. The only proven data to reduce the case and safely open all sectors is by increasing the effort to vaccinate the entire population. We can conclude that lockdowns must be avoided to ensure the continuation of the socio-development program, and vaccination can make it safe for the people and the healthcare system. A more aggressive COVID-19 SOP compliance campaign is needed to ensure all sectors to be safely open. Some suggestions to enable the lifting of lockdowns are as follows:

- i- Continue with the current effort by using the PPN strategy and continue to open sectors that are safe for operations as soon as possible.
- ii- Ramp up vaccination program by promoting for the community to register and get the vaccine. The vaccination program should be made easy; no appointment is needed for vaccines and more community vaccine centres such as local clinics and community centres.
- iii- Continue to do aggressive community testing and isolate the infected.
- iv- Conduct psychological operation using all available media to promote the Government's effort to address COVID-19 issues as part of winning the heart and minds of the people.

### **Conclusion**

Malaysia is no exception when it comes to the COVID-19 threat that is currently afflicting the world. Infection statistics have been fluctuating since the first case was discovered in January 2020 and have recently increased. Even though the government has made many initiatives to solve this issue, the addition of clusters continues to occur in the Eastern Region, even it has seen less of industrialization.

The crisis has pushed Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang's socio-economic stability into uncertainty. Various issues and challenges have arisen, and those have the potential to

impede all ECER development plans and projects. Nevertheless, the government has taken steps to restructure its strategy to prioritise resources for the implementation of strategic and high-impact projects and programmes, as well as to provide optimal benefits for investors and people in the region, allowing them to continue operating and ensuring their survival.

On the other hand, from a security perspective, national border control has been strengthened through the integration and collaboration of all related agencies. This measure is critical in preventing any illegal activities, particularly the influx of immigrants who are contributing to the rise in COVID-19 statistics. As a result, security may certainly provide a conducive atmosphere for development purposes. Similarly, development can also strengthen all security factors. Therefore, security and development must be determined to go hand in hand to ensure the sovereignty and stability of a country.

### ***Competing Interests***

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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