

Export of face masks may be banned

Ministry says move will be temporary to meet local demand

By MAZWIN NIK ANIS
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PUTRAJAYA: The government may impose a temporary ban on the export of face masks to meet local demand, which has tripled since the Covid-19 outbreak, said the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry.

Its secretary-general Datuk Hasnol Zam Zam Ahmad said this proposal was discussed at a high-level committee dealing with the Covid-19 issue.

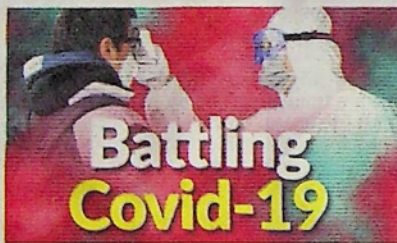
He said demand for three-ply, surgical and industrial face masks was usually about five million pieces a month but this had surged to 15 million pieces monthly.

"The committee accepted the proposal to temporarily ban mask exports, but certain processes need to be carried out first," he said when met after a farewell do for former domestic trade and consumer affairs minister Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution Ismail and his deputy Chong Chieng Jen.

Hasnol said among the issues to be addressed before introducing such a ban was to determine the actual domestic demand.

There was also a need to check with manufacturers on their short-term commitment to supply face masks to avoid them being entangled in contract issues, he said.

Malaysia has fewer than 10 mask manufacturers for surgical and industrial use.



Hasnol said even though supply had increased, the product was flying off the shelves.

"Some areas will have to wait longer as more supplies are being given to certain areas such as Johor where there is a lot of movement of people to and from Singapore, which is also affected by the outbreak.

"Manufacturers are already producing the additional face masks and are looking to see how they can further boost production."

Last month, the government announced that the shortage of three-ply masks would be resolved once local manufacturers start to increase production with an extra 400,000 pieces daily and that the government had guaranteed to buy the product to create stockpiles nationwide.

Face masks are controlled items and are sold at 80 sen per piece for a three-ply mask while the N95 mask is sold at RM6 per unit.



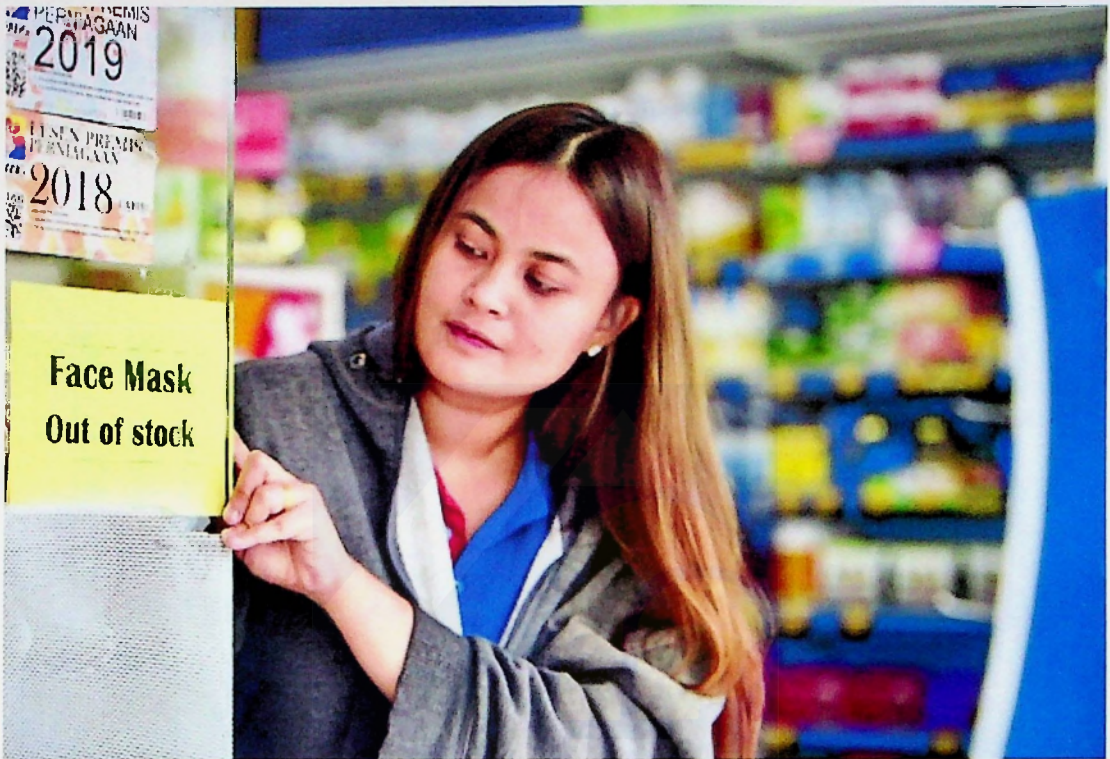
In high demand: A pharmacy worker in Meranti Jaya, Puchong, putting up a sign saying the outlet has run out of face masks.

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