

Uphill battle for face mask suppliers

NATION

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PETALING JAYA: As the novel coronavirus outbreak grips the world in a state of anxiety and people “panic buy” face masks for protection, suppliers say soaring demand for the protective gear cannot be met.

This comes following a statement from Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution Ismail to manufacturers to ramp up production and despite advice from medical experts that masks were not necessary for now since there was no human-to-human transmission.

Safety products company Safetyware Sdn Bhd managing director Wong Kee Wei said the present demand could not be met because China, which supplies more than half of the total face masks globally, was now facing a severe shortage themselves.

China, with its population of 1.4 billion, is now the No. 1 country for demand of face masks and its government has even prohibited manufacturers from exporting their products in order to prioritise local needs.

“The chain effect is, all the other countries which rely on China for mask supply, Malaysia included, are facing a serious shortage now,” he said yesterday.

Safetyware does not manufacture face masks but imports a majority of its supply from China and a small percentage from Taiwan, Britain and the United States.

Saifuddin said on Thursday that his ministry was in talks with face mask manufacturers to ramp up production.

However, Wong said that there were very few local mask manufacturers in Malaysia, with only three major ones located in the Klang Valley, and their capacity was also limited.

“There’s no way to fill the void no matter how much they ramp up their production,” he said.

Moreover, most of the raw materials used in the face masks production were also imported from China, said Wong.

“So I reckon that since China is having mask shortage and has banned the export of masks, I doubt they will be able to supply much of the raw material for mask-making as well,” he said.

Wong said the demand for face masks surged by “easily a thousandfold” due to people in China trying to procure face masks overseas via various means as a way to overcome the shortage there.

“This has prompted many relief organisations, NGOs and private companies to snap up huge quantities of masks and some other medical supplies in the market, to ship back to China.

“The situation is further worsened by the panic sentiment of the public, where we see everyone going out in full force to buy masks for emergency standby purposes,” said Wong.

Local face mask supplier Ritech Marketing manager Rosli Bidin said his company was also running low on face mask stock, with only 20 boxes of tie-on masks left, each box containing 50 sheets of face masks.

"I'm not sure when the new stock will arrive," he said.

Meanwhile, a representative from the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry said there were no limits to how many face masks people could purchase at one time.

He also confirmed that there were no plans to restrict non-Malaysians from buying face masks here.

Currently, the maximum ceiling price has been fixed on five types of masks under the Price Control and Anti-Profitteering Act 2011.

The first three types are with earloops, with the one-layered mask priced at RM5 per box at wholesale price or RM7 per box at retail price.

The other is the two-layered mask sold for RM8 per box at wholesale price or RM10 per box at retail price, or 20 sen per piece.

The third type is the three-layered surgical mask sold at RM25 per box at 80 sen per piece.

The other two types of face masks are the three-layered hijab-friendly one, priced at RM30 per box or 80 sen per piece and the N95 face mask which can be bought for RM100 per box or RM6 per piece.

Errant traders face a maximum fine of RM100,000 or imprisonment of three years, or both, if found guilty, while companies could be fined up to RM500,000 or compounded up to RM250,000 if found guilty of exceeding the ceiling price.

