

COVID-19 pandemic could last 4 to 5 years: Lawrence Wong

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It may take four to five years before the COVID-19 pandemic ends and the world can look to a "post-COVID normal", said Education Minister Lawrence Wong on Monday (Jan 25).

"At some point in time the pandemic will pass, but it may take four to five years before we finally see the end of the pandemic and the start of a post-COVID normal. What will this new post-COVID world look like? No one can tell," he said.

Mr Wong, who co-chairs the COVID-19 multi-ministry taskforce, was speaking at the Singapore Perspectives 2021 conference hosted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

In a 30-minute speech on the final day of the four-day conference, the minister highlighted how there are still many uncertainties to contend with in the next few years, while sharing his hopes about how the future can be "reset" once the pandemic is over.

"Reset" was the theme of the hybrid conference, held online and in-person at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre, which sought to imagine how Singapore could look like in 2030.

Mr Wong said there was still "great uncertainty" about how the coronavirus will shape society in the coming years. Adhering to safe management measures like mask-wearing and avoiding crowds will continue for this year and "maybe a good part of next year", he said.

"Beyond that, the availability of COVID-19 vaccinations will progressively restart global travel, but getting the world vaccinated won't be quick or easy," he added.

The Government has planned for everyone in Singapore to be vaccinated by the third quarter of this year, but Mr Wong said that there could still be "bumps along the way".

He noted that the current vaccines may not be so effective against new mutant strains of the virus, and will have to be modified to counter them.

"In the positive scenario, this means the vaccine becomes a bit like an annual flu jab ... or perhaps we develop a vaccine that works for all strains. But in the worst case, we end up always a step behind an evolving virus, and you will not be able to catch up in time," he said.

"So there are still tremendous uncertainties ahead of us. And the bottom line is that we live in a shared world and no one is safe until everyone is safe."

When asked later by moderator Straits Times editor Warren Fernandez on whether 2021 will be a re-run, a sequel or a re-make of 2020, Mr Wong said there are important differences between the situation now and last year - mainly that Singapore is better prepared to fight the virus and that there are now vaccines available.

"What we need to do really is to tide through now until the point where everyone in Singapore is vaccinated, maybe the third quarter of the year. Perhaps at the end of the year, there is a solution."

"REBOOT" FOR THE FUTURE

Looking ahead to the post-pandemic future, Mr Wong said the current crisis can set the stage for a "software update" or a "reboot" of Singapore after the damage inflicted by the virus.

"We must reset our social compact to emerge as a fairer and more equal society. The pandemic may be indiscriminate about who it infects but its impact is anything but equal. It has, in fact, widened the gulf between the haves and the have-nots," he said.

He said that Singapore started to prioritise reducing inequality a decade ago, and that last year, many emergency measures were introduced to help lower-income groups. But this year, the temporary measures will have to "taper down" as the economy improves.

However, he foresees that Singaporeans will need more assurance and support in a more uncertain and volatile world.

"The impact of the pandemic has created an added impetus to strengthen our social support system. There will be a permanent shift towards further strengthening of our social safety nets in Singapore to protect the disadvantaged and vulnerable," he said, adding that it will have to be done in a "sustainable manner over the long term".

The minister added that meritocracy in Singapore should not "ossify into a hereditary system".

"We start by intervening early and uplifting our children from birth. That's a key focus and priority for me in the Ministry of Education - that's why we're making significant investments in pre-school," said Mr Wong, who took over the education portfolio this year after the General Election in July.

Expanding on his outlook for Singapore's education system, he said the country is making "fundamental shifts" in its model to facilitate education for life.

"We want to have multiple entry points across the age distribution and across the entire skill spectrum. And thereby enable everyone to reskill, upgrade and continuously improve to be the best possible version of themselves," he said.

GREENER, MORE UNITED SINGAPORE

Mr Wong said that the pandemic has also thrown a spotlight on the unequal value society places on different types of workers, and added that this needs to change.

"Merit has become narrowly defined by academic and cognitive abilities but there's a wide range of abilities and aptitudes needed for societies to thrive," he said.

"We've come to better appreciate the contributions of our essential workers ... We must honour them for their work and accord them the dignity and respect they deserve. We must ensure they receive fair remuneration for the important work they do."

Mr Wong highlighted two more ways Singapore can "reset" - to become greener and to strengthen solidarity among its people.

He said that the pandemic led to a temporary fall in carbon emissions when human activity came to a standstill, and the natural world began to heal.

"We cannot go back to the status quo ante ... climate change will be the existential emergency of our time. So we must build a greener economy and society that's more environmentally sustainable."

He said that while the pandemic sharpened divisions in some countries, it has brought Singaporeans together.

"I am confident that we will prevail and emerge stronger from this crucible, and I do not say this lightly. I speak from my own conviction of seeing the best of Singaporeans over the past year in the face of adversity and very tough conditions," he said.

A renewed sense of solidarity is important as it will help Singapore build a better society, said the minister.

"My hope is for Singapore to emerge as a fairer, greener and more equal country with a much stronger spirit of solidarity and shared purpose," he said.