

Impact need not be severe if COVID-19 turns into a 'pandemic', says health expert at IPS forum

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While there has been talk of the current COVID-19 outbreak becoming a pandemic, this did not mean the impact of the disease would be severe, said the Ministry of Health's communicable diseases director Associate Professor Vernon Lee.

He was one of four panellists speaking on Tuesday (Feb 25) at an online forum on Singapore's response to the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and broadcast via a Facebook Live video from the social media giant's Singapore studio.

The other panellists included IPS senior research fellow Dr Carol Soon, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies senior fellow Dr Shashi Jayakumar and United Overseas Bank (UOB) economist Barnabas Gan.

Assoc Prof Lee said the term pandemic refers to the widespread transmission of a disease in different parts of the world. In practical terms, this means the disease is spreading very quickly and is likely to be difficult to contain globally, he added.

On Tuesday, World Health Organization (WHO) director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned of a "potential pandemic" with the recent surge in cases of COVID-19 outside of China.

Assoc Prof Lee noted the term does not however mean the impact of the disease will necessarily be severe.

He pointed to the H1N1 outbreak of 2009, which was declared a pandemic by the WHO in June of that year, as an example.

While H1N1 was termed a pandemic due to how widespread it was, scientists had also discovered that the effects of the disease were quite mild and similar to seasonal influenza in terms of severity, he said.

"So while there was a pandemic, if you recall life went on as usual for the most part, with some measures to try to reduce the disease's spread and also target our measures at the at-risk individuals," he added.

A pandemic can be either mild or severe, said Assoc Prof Lee.

"How (the current coronavirus situation) will pan out, it could go either way, so we really have to see what the characteristics of the disease are."

UOB's Mr Gan noted the Singapore Tourism Board's forecast that tourism here could fall by as much as 25 to 30 per cent this year, could translate into a S\$6.8 billion to S\$8.1 billion fall in revenue from tourism.

IPS research deputy director Gillian Koh, who moderated the forum, asked Mr Gan if measures announced by Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat as part of this year's

Budget - such as the S\$4 billion allocated to support businesses and workers during this time - would be enough to tide over businesses during a period of economic uncertainty.

Mr Gan said such measures could help spur the economy and cushion the slowdown. He added the country's budget surplus of S\$18.7 billion - compared to the S\$10.9 billion deficit - points to more than S\$7 billion that could be used to push up the economy if needed.

Responding to a question on whether the fact that Singapore has seen no deaths from COVID-19 so far means that the economic and social damage could be more than the health impact, Mr Gan said the country could not be blamed for being overcautious.

Assoc Prof Lee said that while there are a lot of hypotheses on how the virus can be beaten, these are based on experience with other diseases, COVID-19 is still very new.

Singapore had to be flexible in how it handled its approach to the coronavirus, he added.

"I think while we hope for the best, we have to prepare for all scenarios," he said.