

Coronavirus: Conditions in dorms not main reason for clusters, says Tan Chuan-Jin

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The massive outbreak of coronavirus cases among migrant workers in dormitories cannot be attributed to bad living conditions alone, even if there are abysmal examples, said Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin yesterday.

Rather, the highly contagious nature of the coronavirus and the fact that dorms involve groups of people living in close quarters are more likely to have contributed to the spread, said Mr Tan, who was Manpower Minister from 2014 to 2015.

Speaking on the sidelines of an event for migrant worker dorms yesterday, Mr Tan said it was important not to conflate the two issues of bad living conditions and the Covid-19 pandemic, which he called a healthcare crisis of "monumental proportions".

"For example, in our universities, if the hostels remained open and the students were there, you would expect a massive outbreak to occur as well. If people are living in close quarters, given the contagious nature of this virus, outbreaks will occur," he said.

Tackling questions regarding the outbreak in the dormitories, that as of yesterday has hit more than 18,000 cases, Mr Tan said it was not about "white-washing" cases of "abysmal" dorm conditions, but one should not generalise that all living conditions are as such.

There were 741 new Covid-19 cases reported yesterday, bringing Singapore's total to 20,939.

The living conditions of lower-paid foreign workers have been in the spotlight recently when dorms emerged as huge clusters where the coronavirus has spread. The outbreak highlighted the cramped and poorly maintained living spaces of some of these workers and their low-quality catered meals.

On Monday, Manpower Minister Josephine Teo assured Parliament that the Government will see how housing standards for migrant workers can be further raised.

Mr Tan said: "It doesn't excuse (bad conditions), it is not acceptable and we need to take stringent action against those who violate the law - but it doesn't represent the whole space and that's the context that is important.

"It is important to speak to the migrant workers as a whole for their lived experience to have a sense of the conditions. And given the scale and nature of this outbreak, we should not conflate the causes with these less-than-accurate generalisations."

When asked about the raising of dorm standards here, Mr Tan said there are things that can be improved on and the Government will be taking stock of the lessons learnt and the adjustments that need to be made.

"It is something that we will work on, but meanwhile, let's grapple with the (present) issues, look after our people and look after all the people who are here in Singapore who are affected in different ways," he said.

During an online forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies on Wednesday, analysts said a whole-of-society effort is needed to improve the wages and living conditions of foreign workers here.

Not only must the Government take the lead in making structural changes, but Singaporeans, too, must change their us-versus-them mindset and take up collective responsibility, said the panellists.