

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL TASK FORCE IN RESPONDING TO ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Border security is an essential component of Malaysia's defence and security policy. During the COVID-19 outbreak, Malaysia's border security management was tested with the increase of illegal entry into the country. The central argument of this paper is that, whilst Movement Control Order (MCO), or lockdown as it is more commonly known, aims to restrict movement, this limited movement was exploited for illegal entries into the country, leading to the establishment of the National Task Force (NTF), which coordinated various enforcement agencies to safeguard Malaysian territory. On this ground, this paper aims to analyse the role of the NTF in responding to increasing illegal activities amidst the pandemic. The discussion is divided into: (a) identifying illegal entries during the pandemic; (b) the impact of illegal entries to border management in Malaysia; (c) examining the roles of the NTF in responding to the illegal activities; and (d) the impact of the NTF in border security management in Malaysia. As a preliminary study, this paper only uses secondary data collection in addressing the problem statement.

Keywords: National task force; COVID-19 pandemic; Illegal activities; Illegal immigrants; Border security management

INTRODUCTION

The world is now facing its greatest global health challenge. The COVID-19 virus was believed to have emerged in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, and by March 2020, it had escalated and spread to every part of the world. Subsequently, the World Health Organisation (WHO) labelled COVID-19 a pandemic because of its infectious nature and alarming death levels within the human population. It is transmitted through contact and attacks respiratory systems, eventually causing death. Hence, many restrictions were put into place to eliminate human contact worldwide (Ho 2020). In Malaysia, when these restrictions were implemented, it impacted the economic wellbeing and challenged the border security in the country. As a consequence, this situation was exploited for other crimes to flourish. Crime is a business in the shadow economy that thrives in conditions of lax security.

This paper argues that, whilst the Movement Control Order (MCO), or lockdown as it is better known, aims to 'restrict movement', 'reduce contact', and further 'isolate the virus' in Malaysia, the pandemic environment has been exploited by illegal groups. While the government was focused on public order and tightening control of people's movements within the country in order to curb the spread of COVID-19, this restricted movement became conducive for exploitation by illegal immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and pandemic profiteers to enter the country.

This exploitation was simple: the sea remained an important medium for transportation despite the pandemic. Internally, although the land borders were restricted with MCO, land

was an important medium for movement of essential goods. The seamless ocean border and the porosity of land borders challenged the internal security of a country with illegal activities and pandemic profiteering, such as smuggling drugs, cigarettes, and wildlife; these groups were fast in seizing opportunities to profit from the pandemic – many new modes of operation were adopted for committing illegal crimes. Because ocean and land routes at the border remained the main access for unwelcomed guests, COVID-19 vulnerabilities left Malaysian borders exposed to illicit activities. As a result, military and law enforcement agencies were required to safeguard the borders and the NTF was established to respond to these illegal activities.

The paper is significant in three perspectives. First, it presents the effectiveness of policy makers in responding to unprecedented events such as the pandemic. The NTF set out bold plans in order to realise a cohesive, targeted, inclusive organisation that is able to respond proactively and effectively to emerging threats. Second, illegal entry to the country is not new and many operations were implemented, but most often these operations were conducted individually or with one or two agencies. However, this paper highlights the consolidation efforts taken by NTF to overcome this issue which were a stand-alone function prior to the pandemic. Third, there are limited literature that discusses the role of NTF in detail in addressing illegal entry to the country – most of the literature found are in the form of commentaries or newspaper writings. This paper therefore presents a solid representation of the role of NTF in addressing the illegal activities to the country.

Against this backdrop, this paper explicitly examines the COVID-19 impact on border security management in Malaysia by revealing the illegal entries into the country during the pandemic. The paper further analyses the role of the NTF in responding to increasing illegal entries amidst the pandemic. The discussion is divided into three parts: (a) identifying illegal entries during the pandemic; (b) the impact of illegal entries to border management in Malaysia; (c) examining the roles of the NTF in responding to illegal entries; and (d) the impact of the NTF on border security management in Malaysia. This research used a secondary data collection method consisting of official reports from government websites, newspaper writings, and journals.

It is found that since the establishment of NTF, consolidation between border agencies improved. Moreover, the government began improving its assets and technology in assisting the military and law enforcement agencies in safeguarding the borders in the country. However, this paper recommends that in order for NTF operate to the fullest, strong governance, if required, play an important role.

IILEGAL ENTRIES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

During the pandemic, various forms of illegal cross-border entries were observed. These involved human smuggling and trafficking and confiscation and smuggling of illegal items such as drugs, cigarettes, and wildlife. Two activities in particular got the government's attention. First: the influx of illegal immigrants. Malaysia is a recipient of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants on the basis of humanitarian grounds. During the pandemic, Malaysia was tested with an influx of these groups into the country. It was estimated that about 2,000 Rohingya were already in the country being tracked down for virus screenings after participating in a mosque gathering in February 2020 (Rohingyas for Covid-19 checks after tabligh gathering 2020; Sharuna et al. 2021; Ain et al. 2020). This cluster was seen even more during the pandemic and MCO period. Using sea routes, 200 Rohingya people landed in Langkawi (Malaysia turns back Rohingya boat over coronavirus fears 2020).

The pandemic was conducive for arrival at Malaysian waters, as observed with the second wave of refugees making land in Langkawi on April 5th, 2020. On the 16th of April

2020, another group of Rohingya illegal immigrants attempted to enter Langkawi. The threat that this cluster can bring is disastrous in terms of spreading the pandemic. During a press statement by the Health Director-General Datuk Dr. Noor Hisham Abdullah's at the beginning of pandemic in Malaysia around April, 601 foreigners were tested positive for COVID-19. Most of them were coming from Indonesia, Philippines, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Majority of them were migrant workers, tourists, asylum seekers, or refugees (Carvalho 2020). The second illegal activity of note during COVID-19 can be broadly categorised as pandemic profiteering by criminals, including drug smuggling into the country. Drug syndicates can be detrimental to the country because of their global nature, with large impacts on socio-economic wellbeing and livelihood. Drug substances are already an existing market in Southeast Asia, and Malaysia has been used as a transit country for trafficking via the sea. During MCO, land and aviation activity significantly decreased, but the maritime industry is still the main artery and operative for the nation's life support and essential goods. As such, illegal groups adopted new modus operandi during MCO, picking losses during total lockdown and seeking for profit with the reopening of some businesses. This was made evident with the increased number of cases between March 18 and April 16, 2020. Since the lockdown and subsequent high demand for food delivery services, drug syndicates have found creative and innovative ways to distribute drugs this way.

Delivery services have become the new modus operandi during pandemic, alongside other conventional methods, as is shown with more daily cases. Between April 10 and April 13, five large-scale drug trafficking were reported (Zolkepli 2020) as follows:

- RM 3.5 million drug bust, including 61 kg of syabu in Kuala Lumpur.
- RM56,000 drug bust including 6 kg heroin and RM 1 million worth of syndicates assets seized in Penang.
- 20 kg heroin drug bust including 12 kg seizure of ketamine in Taiping, Perak.
- 4.5 kg heroin and 1.5 kg heroin base in Bayan Lepas.
- 151 people detained after involving in a wild party during MCO.

On April 15, two suspects were arrested in Bandar Kinrara, with authorities seizing 120 kg of syabu and RM6,000 and a number of ecstasy pills. This case led to other several other busts of syabu supply chains (Comoens 2020). For criminals, bleak times like the COVID-19 pandemic are great opportunities to expand their markets.

THE IMPACT OF ILLEGAL ENTRIES ON BORDER MANAGEMENT DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The rampant cases of illegal cross-border entries are worrying because they weaken the socio-economic, health, political standing of the country, and challenging the country's border management in several ways.

First, the pandemic challenges Malaysia's ability to draw a clear line between humanitarian assistance and security preservation. The recent decision to deny access to the country was condemned by the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Malaysia has been a major recipient of Rohingya communities since 1970, and as of end of July 2021, there are around 102,960 Rohingya in the country. Around 154,860 are from Myanmar, 22,490 Chins and 29,390 are from other ethnic groups from conflict-affected areas or fleeing persecution in Myanmar. (UNCHR 2021). However, Malaysia did not sign the 1951 United Nation Convention on Human Rights 1951, nor its 1967 protocol. This shows that Malaysia has the right to its sovereignty and the survivability of its nation by taking precautionary measures

against the spread of COVID-19. It appears that one single refusal to protect its own people has tarnish Malaysia's reputation amongst international communities on its role as a compassionate and responsive country toward humanitarian assistance. This further challenged the Ministry of Home Affairs to draw a long-term strategy for handling illegal entries to the country, because this particular pandemic is an infectious disease; allowing illegal immigrants into the country may expose local citizens to the pandemic and further threaten human security. This concern was addressed by the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF): RMAF said that, due to undocumented migrants' poor settlements and living conditions, there is a high possibility that these group can bring COVID-19 into the country (Bedi 2020).

Second, there is also a high possibility that pandemic profiteering criminals will seek to exploit other communities, especially along the coastal area, such as fisherman who lost their jobs during MCO. According to the Malaysian Department of Statistics, 33 percent of workers in the fisheries sub-sector reported job losses due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Agriculture, services sectors see highest percentage of job losses 2020). This impacts Malaysia's fishery industry through the emergence of illegal fishing. Unemployed fishermen still living near the sea may be tempted to get involved in illegal activities. Drug smuggling can be lucrative, so activity may escalate during the pandemic. In the long run, people will become dependent on the drug and will be lured back to the business for more financial gain. When this happens, the government will have to face another health crisis in the form of drug dependency. With more spending on rehabilitation, government allocation funds will be stretched thin. As the country tries to reach economic recovery, the consequences of drug activities do not bode well.

Third, though not as commonplace, illegal wildlife trade has continued during the pandemic. The ASEAN Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN) has constantly addressed this issue in the region. Since COVID-19 originated from a mutation in wildlife, there is a need to curtail further disease from wildlife trafficking. Criminals and their networks handling illegal wildlife most certainly are not taking precautions. This impacts front liners at sea, which may have first contact with a disease entering the country. Contact with people infected with the disease or other entities will be detrimental to maritime personnel and have far-reaching effects, not only on themselves, but their families and community. While safeguarding borders, they are also expected to ensure they are not infected by disease that may be brought in by wildlife smuggling. Until there is a proper protective mechanism in place, people in contact with these activities are vulnerable.

Fourth, given the circumstances, the healthcare systems are over-stretched at this time and the immigration detention centre has exceeded its capacity. This will exhaust government funds, which will allocate money to support illegal immigrants instead of unemployed citizens. The country's priority remains business continuity, but money will be wasted towards security instead of health care services. If not curtailed, increasing illegal entries will lead to more energy and resources spent on border management instead of medical supplies. In short, the government will have an ineffective health management during pandemic. In addition, Malaysia's imagined and international standing will be damaged. All of these challenges are reasons for the government to commit to effective border management by re-strategizing and re-thinking its pandemic strategy.

THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL TASK FORCE IN RESPONDING TO ILLEGAL ENTRIES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In view of current pandemic threats, cooperation in curbing illegal cross-border activities, such as human smuggling, drug trafficking, sea robbery, kidnapping for ransom, and more, has to

become more exigent. Eradicating these threats does not rest solely on a specific agency. Hence, it was crucial for the government to consolidate all relevant security enforcement agencies under an integrated force to address these threats. The objective to gather key security enforcement agencies were brought forward by The Chief of Defence Forces to the National Security Council (NSC). As a result, the National Task Force (NTF) was formed on 7th May 2020, headed by the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF). Various agencies were told to ‘come together’ with the NTF in preventing illegal border crossing from getting out of hand: the NTF, in turn, integrated the operation with other security enforcement agencies to undertake the task and objectives of managing border security threats that occurred during the pandemic.

The main elements and driving forces that constitute the establishment of the NTF are the MAF, the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP), and the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA). Alongside these three main security enforcement agencies, the NTF also collaborated with other government agencies, such as the Royal Malaysian Customs, Malaysian Immigration Department, Ministry of Health Malaysia and Civil Defence Agency (Tharishini 2020). The NTF’s main objective is to develop and execute a plan for monitoring and gathering information in order to coordinate security action plans and contain the illegal entry of migrants at all of the country’s entrances and border areas, including land, sea, and air. Accordingly, the NTF developed an integrated operation to accomplish the tasks assigned by the government. The operation codenamed OP BENTENG identified the illegal routes along the West Coast of the Peninsula Malaysia, the East Coast of Sabah, and the inland border of Sarawak/Kalimantan; it also heightened the maritime operations along the Malacca Straits and Sulu Sea in order to stop illegal entries from crossing the country's land and borders, preventing new clusters of COVID-19. The NTF and OP BENTENG are based on policies issued on the national strategic level. Among the national strategic policy documents that are used as main references are the Defence White Paper (DWP) and Security and Public Order Policy (*Dasar Keselamatan dan Ketenteraman Negara – DKKA*).

Defence White Paper

The establishment of the NTF no doubt implements the fundamentals of DWP. OP BENTENG especially carries a meaningful message from the inaugural DWP, which was approved by the Government of Malaysia in 2019. Namely, two elements from DWP spell out the strong grassroots of the policy essence in the concept of operation of OP BENTENG: Comprehensive Defence and Concentric Areas. Comprehensive Defence demands for total commitment of the Whole-of-Government (WoG) and Whole-of-Society (WoS) (Defence White Paper 2019). This refers to the whole action of the government, non-governmental agencies (NGO), and society to defend the nation's sovereignty against all forms of attack from military or non-military entities. The national effort to curb frequent sea and land intrusions by illegal immigrants into Malaysia through multiple security agencies such as the NTF and OP BENTENG is proof of the collaboration’s effectiveness.

The NTF’s border control operations mobilize an integrated force to control and develop multiple domain capabilities across the main area of concentric layers; the core, extended, and forward areas. From the NTF’s perspective, the concept of operation in the concentric areas is as follows: (1) Core Area is the Malaysia’s land territory and its territorial water; (2) Extended Area is up to limits of the Malaysian Maritime Zone (MMZ); and (3) Forward Area encompasses beyond the extended area where Malaysia’s national interests are affected (Defence White Paper 2019 p. 39) - this is parallel to the DWP. All the agencies conduct effective deterrence and response in their areas of responsibility and surrounding areas of interest through the application of specific tasks called 6D (Deter, Detection, Deny, Detour,

Detain and Deport), which are properly linked to achieve the end goal of OP BENTENG. They are defined as follows:

- Deter implements prevention using IO methods and demonstrates presence in the operating area at any time.
- Detection optimizes surveillance, systems, tracking systems, and information networks to identify illegal immigrants.
- Deny coordinates operations with other security agencies to curb the entry of illegal immigrants.
- Detouring overshadows illegal immigrant boats out of Malaysian waters.
- Detain brings illegal immigrants to the authorities for further action.
- Deport assists authorities and agencies involved in the repatriation of illegal immigrants to their country of origin.

Security and Public Order Policy (*Dasar Keselamatan dan Kententeraman Negara – DKKA*)

The new DKKA, launched in 2019, was timely, as it aimed to protect the well-being of the people while ensuring Malaysia's presence as a sovereign, peaceful, prosperous, and respected nation. This security policy encapsulates six (6) thrusts as a guideline and reference for all interested parties in facing various security and public order issues (*Dasar Keselamatan dan Ketenteraman Awam 2019 p.5*). Among them are defending and upholding the constitution and key national institutions, improving governance and integrity, strengthening security control at the country's border, combating the drug menaces, and protecting national assets and key targets (Lee 2019).

Under the new DKKP, the NTF is required to enhance Thrust 3, Strengthening Border Security Controls, to the greatest extent possible by strengthening cooperation between security and enforcement agencies, including the establishment of direct channels of communication. This trust consists of four strategies (*Dasar Keselamatan dan Ketenteraman Awam 2019 p.11*):

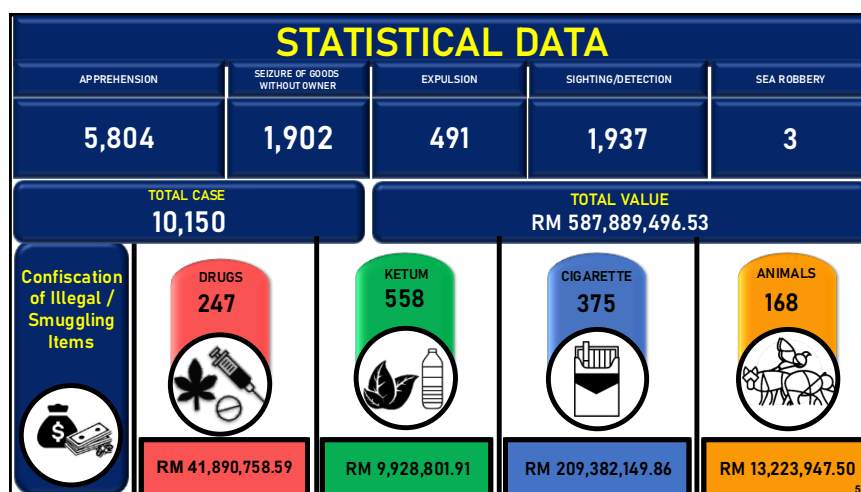
- a. Strategy 1: Continuous and Integrated Improvement of Border Control and Surveillance. This strategy is meant to eliminate intrusion and smuggling and to control national borders. Efforts need to be continuously intensified and integrated in order to improve border control and surveillance. Necessary steps include improving infrastructure and increasing usage of technology, in addition to strengthening coordinated inter-agency enforcement. The action plans undertaken by the NTF are in terms of enhancing integrated patrols. Integrated operation at the borders include coordinated patrols by MAF, RMP, and other enforcement agencies. The integrated operational concept with close cooperation between agencies includes focusing on the Malacca Straits and Southeast Johore. For example, the NTF has implemented Pilot Test that involved the Malaysian Army and General Operations Force (GOF) at the border of Peninsula (Perlis, Kedah, Perak, and Kelantan).
- b. Strategy 2: Strengthening Intelligence Gathering and Law Enforcement on Cross-Border Crime. Cross-border crimes such as contraband activities, aggression, and human trafficking have long-term consequences that may threaten Malaysia's sovereignty and security. This issue, if unchecked, will affect the country's image in the eyes of the world and increase security risks. National border control needs to be reinforced through capacity building and intelligence sharing, which can help solidify

monitoring, surveillance, and enforcement more effectively. The intelligence community is also assisted by the MAF's intelligence community and national enforcement agencies through the Combined Intelligence Working Group (CIWG). Of course, the regional and neighbouring nations' security environment needs to be monitored, because it indirectly influences the entry of illegal immigrants into Malaysia. The focus of monitoring is on maritime and land borders throughout Malaysia.

- c. Strategy 3: Fortifying Law Enforcement for Border Security. Laws related to national border security were enacted to control all activities at the entrances and borders of the country. Border security laws must be constantly reviewed and improved including re-evaluating the infrastructure, assets, and personnel requirements based on current situation.
- d. Strategy 4: Comprehensive Non-Citizen Management System. A non-citizen management integrated system that is less risky and competitive in terms of cost must be created. The latest comprehensive technology-based integrity system is important in ensuring the management of foreigners are efficient, transparent, and effective.

With all these strategies and policies in line, since its inception through 18 July 2021, the NTF has successfully apprehended 5,804 total cases of illegal immigrants and agents (*tekong*) who helped illegal immigrants enter Malaysia [NTF, (2021)]. Additionally, this task force has contributed to eradicating smuggling activities along the country's borders. As of 18 July 2021, a total of 1,348 smuggling activities have been thwarted, with confiscation values worth more than RM 587 million (NTF 2021).

Table 1. [National Task Force Statistics on 18th July 2021]



Source: Commander NTF Presentation during MiDAS Dialogue Serial 1/2021

Collectively, in ensuring that the borders are safe from any form of penetration, an approximate total of 718 officers and 11,986 other ranks of the nation's security forces are deployed on a daily, 24-hour basis (Sugenderan 2020). Furthermore, a costly series of air surveillances has been conducted day and night by RMAF, Air Operations Force from RMP

and MMEA to provide constant surveillance in preventing these illegal immigrants from entering the country. Surveillance drones are deployed for this purpose, in addition to existing assets and manpower from all the agencies. Furthermore, at sea, many ships and boats from the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN), RMP, and MMEA are conducting patrols every day within the country's territorial waters to prevent these illegal immigrants from entering the country. Previously, all security enforcement agencies were responding to illegal immigration with their assets, personnel, and capabilities as standalone operations or, when required, cooperatively and bilaterally between agencies. However, with this newly established task force, it is evident that Malaysia beside responding to traditional threats, is also serious in addressing non-traditional threats such as illegal entries to the country. It is proven that the MAF is consistent and apt in carrying out new mechanisms and most importantly effective measures time to time in dealing with emerging security threats to the country. With all security agencies now operating under a well-coordinated force such as NTF, information sharing and domain awareness on illegal immigration has improved vastly. The impact of COVID-19 has in some way led Malaysia towards the right direction in addressing and curbing issues related to cross-border activities, and, most importantly, curbing the transmission of COVID-19. Good policy and governance has been a major reason for such prompt respond in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic - key defence and security policies such as DWP and DKKA has brought clarity in task and objectives on border security issues in Malaysia.

THE IMPACT OF NATIONAL TASK FORCE TO MALAYSIA'S BORDER SECURITY MANAGEMENT

Better Consolidation After the Establishment of the NTF

Since the 1990s the Malaysian government has dealt with the issue of illegal immigrants. It began in 1992 with Operasi Nyah, which aimed to improve border surveillance and prevent illegal entry and was followed by Operasi Nyah II which aimed to capture migrants who had stayed unlawfully. (Kudo 2013; Azizah & Ragayah 2011). However, earlier efforts by various enforcement agencies such as custom, immigration, navy, and marine police did not sufficiently curb the entry of illegal migrants into Malaysia. This failure may be due to the responsibilities of these agencies in law enforcement, which are limited to their own primary functions and jurisdictions. Notably, not all agencies with overlapping roles and responsibilities are ripe for consolidation. It requires an establishment of a coherent mission and integrated strategic goals as guidance. Furthermore, consolidation requires dedicated implementation teams to manage the operations.

The establishment of the NTF amid the COVID-19 pandemic is a timely, comprehensive effort towards strengthening governance and improving existing enforcement agencies in ensuring the security of land and sea borders. 'Good governance' can be defined as 'the responsibility and accountability for the overall operation' of an organisation. Better consolidation in terms of collaboration, integration, and careful planning among the enforcement agencies under the NTF administration has managed to diminish a number of illegal activities and contain the spread of COVID-19. With the mobilisation of integrated forces under the NTF using the 6D method, the OP BENTENG became a national spotlight. Since the OP BENTENG, more than 12,000 undocumented immigrants have been detained while 922 skippers (*tekong*) were nabbed by the NTF (12,000 illegal nabbed in Ops Benteng since last year 2021). Based on frequent reports of arrests of illegal immigrants under OP BENTENG, the NTF demonstrated its effectiveness in consolidating various enforcement agencies for integrated patrolling and monitoring the country's borders and check points.

Armed forces, as well as other law enforcement authorities including the police were stationed at the border in pre-determined sectors. Due to collaboration and cooperation among agencies, the NTF managed to detect hotspot areas and preferred routes used by illegal immigrants to cross into the country (Maimunah 2021).

Another testament to the close cooperation between agencies is the coordinated deportation of illegal immigrants with the Immigration Department (Maimunah 2021). The NTF found out that more than 8,000 people were detained for immigration violations between May and early November 2020 (Tahir 2020). A total of 36,717 detainees have been deported during the MCO. As recorded by the Department of Fisheries, up to RM6 billion was lost to illegal fishing every year (DOF: Malaysia loses RM6 billion each year to illegal fishing 2019). When the government implemented MCO to contain the transmission of COVID-19, many fishermen from Vietnam and Indonesia took advantage of the situation to enter Malaysian waters. As such, Malaysian enforcement agencies under the NTF administration toughened their measures against illegal fishing. It was reported that through collaborated operations conducted by the MMEA, the Fisheries Department, the RMN, the RMAF, and the RMP under the NTF, a number of Vietnamese and Indonesian fishing boats and crews were seized (Dhesagaan 2020).

Former Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyidin Yassin, in his keynote address at '*Setahun Malaysia Prihatin*', stressed that the government will focus on border control through the transformation of management and governance. The government adopted a five-front approach to include areas most popular amongst illegal immigrants, namely the northern border of Kedah, Kelantan, South, Sabah, and Sarawak (*Setahun Malaysia Prihatin* keynote address 2021); the NTF is expected to play a key role in this endeavour.

In essence, no level of government is ready to face a health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Even a coordinated response by all levels of government can only minimize crisis-management failures. Furthermore, given the extent and scale of the COVID-19 situation, all levels of government are being challenged to strengthen their partnership. But inter-agency collaboration can be useful to response a pandemic such as COVID-19. Transparent and accurate communication based on mutual trust and respect among all agencies is therefore fundamental. It promotes knowledge sharing, which then leads to more effective solutions. Bringing together different levels of agencies to define goals and develop strategies can help containment and recovery operations more effectively. Before the establishment of the NTF, enforcement agencies lacked sufficient coordination, preparation, and intelligence information sharing. However, the NTF's integration of land, sea and air components has improved intelligence information sharing cooperation between the agencies, resulting in optimum utilization and mobilization of existing assets for effective enforcement measures. (Maimunah 2021). Amidst the crisis, the NTF has proven its ability to foster coordination across levels of government, clarifying roles and responsibilities among various agencies to optimize strategies and resource deployment.

Improvement in Technology and New Assets

The NTF has helped to strengthen technology and asset acquisition in terms of border security aspects. This was made especially evident when the Ministry of Defence added new and more modern-day assets. Increased use of modern assets will help realize the operations of OP BENTENG. By 2020, the RMN has acquired 11 units of the Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat (RHIB) and a multipurpose boat unit for the use of border control in the waterfront (Navy receives 11 rigid hull inflatable boats 2020). In early 2021, the MAF received 27 All-Terrain Vehicles (ATV) to strengthen OP BENTENG's mobility across the country's borders (Faizie 2020).

The country's vast border area, consisting of swamps, dense forests, and open hills, gives illegal immigrants the opportunity to smuggle items in through the rat path. Therefore, the border-guarding NTF security agency requires a radar detector system capable of detecting illegal immigrant movement activities at national borders. Among the technology assets used by the army is the Scrambler Kawasaki KLX 250cc motorcycle (Dhillon 2021), which has dual functionality that helps each soldier perform tasks more easily and efficiently.

Additionally, the use of sophisticated technology in OP BENTENG such as drones was noticed. Drones, considered 'eyes in the air', can detect the presence of illegal immigrants, *tekong*, and smugglers in forest areas and mouse lanes. The drones have infra-red capabilities that help military personnel to detect the movement of illegal immigrants using heat. Moreover, drones are ideal in large border areas, such as the East Coast of Sabah, which is otherwise difficult to control – thus far, these drones have greatly assisted in improving the efficiency of air and sea surveillance operations in the Sabah watershed. Since the use of drones in OP BENTENG, the number of illegal immigrants trying to enter the country dropped to 35 percent compared to before OP BENTENG (*Ops Benteng: Penahanan PATI di sempadan turun 35 peratus* 2021). The use of drones, driven by the Defence Intelligence Staff Division (DISD), is one of multiple factors in the MAF's ability to ensure the effectiveness of OP BENTENG. The 'eye in the air' strategy is one of the many other long-term methods that was adopted in a short time and the Armed Forces had 55 drones in operation nationwide.

It is also observed that each military service continues to improve its asset procurements which that supporting the OP BENTENG. For instance, the MAF has its own asset development program such as the ATM capacity development plan (4D MAF) and CAP55 for the RMAF. The RMN too has its own specific development program that are based on the 15 to 5 transformation program. During the 87th anniversary of the RMN, the Chief of the Navy, Admiral Tan Sri Mohd Reza Mohd Sany, stated that the RMN constantly enhances its defence capability in safeguarding the country's waters from invasion, with strategies focusing on key assets including Littoral Mission Ship (LMS), Multi Role Support Ship (MRSS), and Ship New Generation Patrol Vessel (NGPV). The RMN also plans to acquire several complementary assets or force multipliers, such as Fast Combat Bot (FCB), and Unmanned Aerial System (UAS) (Bakri 2021).

Procurement planning for all RMN assets will be arranged by priority depending on current situations and challenges, especially regarding OP BENTENG, so that the RMN achieves its vision of becoming a credible navy in addressing any form of security threats at sea. The RMN, along with other agencies safeguarding the country's waters via OP BENTENG, will implement information sharing programs with other agencies to bring preparation stages to their highest levels to prevent the entry of illegal immigrants who may spread COVID-19. According to the Chief of Defence Force, General Tan Sri Affendi, OP BENTENG will always be improved. In the latest security and defence evaluations, cyber technology was cited as an approach that needs to be emphasized in OP BENTENG. Military forces of land, sea, and air should be given adequate training in the use and handling of drones and other technology equipment.

However, financial support plays an important role in ensuring the objectives of NTF is achieved. The Ministry of Defence has received an increase in allocation at RM15.86 billion in the 2021 budget (Budget 2021: Defence Ministry's allocation increase shows government's commitment to national security, says senior minister, 2020). This is an increase of 1.8 percent or RM280 million compared with the previous year's RM15.58 billion (Budget 2021: Defence Ministry's allocation increase shows government's commitment to national security, says senior minister 2020). During his tenure as Defence Minister, Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob said that this increase clearly demonstrates the government's deep commitment to national defence. It was due to the uncertainty observed in the non-traditional security realm since the

beginning of the pandemic. The increase in budget in 2021 hence took into account the task ahead for the MAF to deal with the outbreak of COVID-19 and border security threats that coming along with the pandemic. It also focused on supporting the OP BENTENG in controlling the country's borders. In addition, the increase in spending from 2020 to 2021 also shows that the Ministry of Defence, through the NTF team, has supported elements in the DWP and the Total Defence Concept (HANRUH). It is logical that the Ministry of Defence received a higher allocation compared to 2020 due to challenges faced by the country's defence agency, especially the MAF, regarding national border security. Nevertheless, it is important to note that continuous financial assistance is essential in assisting the NTF in performing its tasks and objectives until and when the pandemic subsides.

CONCLUSION

History has shown that deadly pandemics such as smallpox, influenza, Ebola, and SARS have negatively impacted human wellbeing, with long-term social, economic (Sidah et al. 2020), and political elements. In case of COVID-19, a pandemic that has affected the entire globe, every country faces various issues and challenges.

In Malaysia, the pandemic has challenged the country's border security management, with an influx of illegal immigrants and other illegal activities such as smuggling drugs and other illicit items. Malaysia's attraction as a country with many economic opportunities, safe place to live, and healthy livelihood is one of the many reasons for this scenario. Amidst the pandemic, these reasons have led to the difficulty in preventing illegal entries to the country. But, it is important to acknowledge that illegal entry and pandemic profiteering by criminals are problematic because they challenge border management, weaken the socio-economic, health, and political standing of the country.

Hence, it is imperative for Malaysia to prepare for any plausible impacts emerging from during the pandemic, as well as into the future. The main inquiry that Malaysia needs to address is readiness in terms of border security management in the future. Realising the seriousness of the issue at stake, the NTF was established to deliver effective border management; thus far, the NTF has been successful in its operations. All agencies under OP BENTENG has continued their commitment to enforcing operations that protect the security and sovereignty of the country from the encroachment of external elements, including illegal immigrants. Nevertheless, this paper recommends that with greater governance, the NTF can perform its tasks better in the long run and more effectively respond to illegal activities in the future. In addition, since it is a preliminary research, this paper recommends that field visit to several border areas across the country for comparison will provide more substantial evidences on issues and challenges faced by the NTF in addressing illegal activities to the country.

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