

Flu bug provides unhealthy lesson

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Comment

New Sunday Times - 05/03/2009

Mexico hosted two important international conferences on higher education last week in Guadalajara.

A historic city, Guadalajara is named after another city in Spain and the name is said to originate from the Arabic Wadi-al-Hajara meaning "Valley of Stones".

Malaysia has an Honorary Consul in this nice and beautiful city. We can certainly learn a lot from this historic city, known as Mexico's silicon valley, which has rich cultural diversity.

The conference also offered a wealth of common experiences and lessons. But then, this time there is quite another lesson that was learnt from which is rather unplanned, as it were.

It was the sudden "flu" attack on Mexico this time last week.

It began as casual rumours, with no real certainty about it. Life went about as usual in places like Guadalajara, some 600km from the capital city, too far to be concerned.

But that soon changed as reports of some deaths in the capital city, related to the bug, filtered in.

Schools and other educational institutions were closed down as a matter of precaution; shops and places where the public normally congregate suddenly became deserted.

The heat was beginning to be felt even in places like Guadalajara, which had its share of misfortune in 1992 -- a huge explosion about this same time then on April 22.

The anxiety was, therefore, quite understandable, except that this time it was more insidious.

A few days later, schools and universities in the locale were shut down. By then, the public had become much more cautious.



A man and his daughters at the International Airport of Mexico City. More flights were mounted to take foreigners back to their home countries after the alert against the spread of influenza A (H1N1) was raised — AFP picture

Fortunately, by this time the conferences were winding down and most were looking forward to leaving for home.

Except that some would have to transit at Mexico City, the origin of the problem. And there was little choice. This was where it started as a new experience for many.

Beginning at the Guadalajara airport, one began to sense the magnitude of the problem, as more and more people were seen wearing masks over their nose and mouth.

Many were officials and staff of the airport authorities. The seriousness of the situation was further compounded when passengers were also issued with similar masks.

Some dutifully put them on, others were rather ambivalent about it. The feeling was very mixed, to say the least.

To be on the safe side, why not put them on? Although in the heart of hearts, they may not be entirely foolproof. It was more for the psychology of it, perhaps.

Then came an announcement that our flight was delayed, a situation which would otherwise have been readily accepted.

When it was time to board, everyone made a beeline for the passageway leading to the aircraft.

Soon after boarding, the passengers were asked to leave the plane, pick up their luggage as though they had just arrived; go through Customs and check in again for another flight to Mexico City.

Could it be the bug had got the better of things? This was the question that seemed most likely on the lips of the passengers.

And what would be next?

Some 10 hours later, we flew safely out of Mexico. But this was not the end. In fact, it was just the beginning. It was soon revealed that more than 60 people had died of what was identified as the "influenza A (H1N1)", with many more suspected to have contracted the illness.

The mask is of little consequence, it seems. What is there to say?

Meanwhile, news of travel advisories not to visit Mexico City was issued. It was reported that more flights were mounted to take foreigners back to their home countries.

It was then that the whole episode seemed to have acquired a "new" lesson.

While we were aware of the "bug" that's causing the panic and havoc, we were less aware of the foreign "bugs" that leave off the country, enjoy and profit from what it has to offer, only to dump it at the slightest sign of uncertainty and run back to the safe haven of their own countries.

Most certainly, they will be back when all is cool and calm, and quietly become parasites yet again.

All thanks to the phenomena called "globalisation", perhaps a better name for it would be "parasiting".

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