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The tabligh disconnect?

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IT has been more than a month now that the congregation of more than 10,000 people met at a mosque in the capital city. Overnight it became Southeast Asia's Covid-19 hotspot. Better known as *Ijtimak Tabligh* such a gathering used to be held all over the world and attended by thousands. Thus far the meetings have not attracted much "problem" publicly. It is noted for the kind of dedication and commitment that everyone took to their hearts, without much whining and griping. After all this is not a meeting in a 5-star hotel with the usual "dry" protocol. Rather, it is a down-to-earth meeting of like-minded people focused on strong rapport and brotherhood for the sake of simplicity as well as humility. Everything else is negotiable so that the state of authenticity is not compromised. You cannot get any better than that, no matter where they gather, when and in what numbers. It could be even in the middle of nowhere at the peak of winter.

More admirable is the social order that is practised as a matter of "decorum" and "discipline". They eat together, seated on the floor in a small circle around a single large tray. The food is freshly prepared by members of the group. Those attending these gathering are from all walks of life: professionals, corporate leaders, academics (I know this from them), and of course the lay public. In this event, name and fame, titles and position do not count.

They all literally drank from the same cup. And spend time together at the same "space", which also doubled as the "lecture hall", the place to offer prayers, and eventually the place to sleep when the day is over. Even then, it is for a very short period of less than the usual eight hours. This is to allow for more self-reflection and renewed commitment. In all, there is little to fuss about because worldly status and material wealth are of no consequence.

Given all these lofty ideals, what is surprising of late is the disconnect.

According to Health Director-General Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah about 3,400 tabligh members had yet to be tested as of last week. Reportedly, out of the overall figures, 1,545 cases or 44.36% out of the 3,483 were associated with the gathering. Most of the positive cases were linked to those in attendance, making it the biggest cluster to date. By now, it has given birth to several generations of clusters, involving their family members and close contacts.

Some 3,173 cases are said to be still pending, despite various authorities, be it health or religious or even the Sultan of Selangor personally, making several appeals urging attendees to come forward to ensure that they are safe and healthy.

The reported lukewarm response thus far is indeed disappointing because by now they must have fathomed the fatal risk of their inaction, which can be a matter of life and death; not only to themselves but others who were innocently in contact.

That the majority of those who are reportedly infected as well as the number deaths is a big letdown for the movement's mission to bring peace and harmony to humanity.

What is more considering the number of highly educated professionals among them, not least from the healthcare and medical sectors, who should be highly aware of the precarious situation.

So where is the illusive disconnect? Or is this an unintended consequence that the movement has long overlooked just because they were spared thus far from such tragic miseries in dealing with an invisible "enemy".

In this context, perhaps it is instructive to consider what the renowned scholar, al-Ghazali, said when fighting with the "enemies" that we do not see. Although he was referring to bad habits that are bound to harm us centring on egocentricity, the same could be applied to Covid-19, which figuratively is an "unseen" foe.

And undoubtedly it has shown to be able to cause massive harm to humanity as a whole. To dismiss this reality by pandering more to the individual selves (read, our own ego) is to allow the "invisible" coronavirus to wildly rage risking untold number of lives, now exceeding 50,000. Could this be the tabligh disconnect? If so, it is time to urgently self-reflect.