

RISE IN SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Poor handling of drug abuse issue will worsen pandemic impact

THE World Drug Report 2021 by the United Nations has identified several reasons for drug use associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. Boredom topped the list. Other reasons include pandemic anxiety, stress due to lockdowns, more time spent with friends or family members who are drug users and the stockpiling of drugs before lockdowns.

These reasons shed some light on drug addiction in our country. According to the National Anti-Drugs Agency, the majority of those suffering from substance abuse are low-educated teenagers and unemployed young adults. The main reasons they got involved in drug abuse were peer influence, curiosity and enjoyment.

It is common for people to turn to their friends when they are bored, facing stressful situations or dealing with family issues. And, they are more exposed to drug abuse if drug addicts are part of their circle of friends. Research on group identity also found that teenagers in pop, techno, skate, hip-hop and hippie groups are more likely to use sub-



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stance, compared with those in quiet, sporty, religious or computer groups.

Thus, it is very critical to promote a healthy living environments and leisure activities for youths. Continuous investment in effective public awareness programmes can eliminate or decrease drug abuse.

Can religion prevent drug abuse? The National Survey on Drug Use and Health studied how religiosity relates to drug abuse. An analysis of 70,000 respondents showed that across all illicit drugs, non-religious respondents had a past-year drug usage rate that was almost three times higher than religious respondents.

But, how can we relate the findings with the situation here,

when many drug addicts are located in Johor, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu — the states that seem to be more Islamic and have a higher religious population?

Well, religious people are not entirely risk-free when it comes to drug misuse. In fact, the first recorded drug phenomenon in Islam was traced to the late 10th century in Makkah and was also used among mystics to arouse mental excitement, divine inspiration and endure long hours of meditation and zikr. The idea of using opium and cannabis as potent medicines and therapeutic needs often ended up with maximum dosages and frequent repetitions.

This probably explains the advocacy for medical marijuana and kratom among Malays nowadays. In *Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb*, Ibn Sina described the extraction method of opium and mentioned that opium dulls the intellect, impairs consciousness, weakens digestion and causes death by freezing natural faculties. As such, we need more public education on the medicinal properties of cannabis and kratom, together with its health risks.

Drug abuse is also associated with poverty and low education, when the reality works the other way around. A recreational drug is a luxury market. Cannabis is branded as a premium and higher-priced product and consumers who focus on health and wellness substitute cannabis for alcohol. The purchase of cannabis has increased by 25-30 per cent today than prior to Covid-19.

As the poorer communities may use drugs as a coping mechanism, for peer acceptance or to generate income, they may eventually fall into drug use disorder. Unlike the rich who can afford to pay for quality drugs and receive treatment in private rehabilitation centres, the poorer may drive themselves into drug-related crimes or consume counterfeit drugs and receive their treatment at government cure and care rehabilitation centres.

The law requires drug addicts to undergo compulsory rehabilitation and treatment programmes for two years. The proposed change of punishment by replacing the Drug Dependents (Treatment and Rehabilitation) Act 1983 with the Drug and Sub-

stance Abuse Act will allow more drug addicts to be rehabilitated instead of being imprisoned.

As drug addicts from poorer groups are often being perceived negatively as criminals rather than victims, we need to break the stigma and instead help them towards faster recovery and better reintegration into community. Otherwise, they will relapse or worse, suffer from emotional or mental health due to social isolation and marginalisation.

In sum, drug use and abuse has increased during Covid-19 for a number of reasons. The world needs strong support from families, communities and government to help addicts recover and mitigating future drug abuse.

Covid-19 has already impacted the economy. Poor handling of drug abuse will add to the cost in terms of loss of government revenue from illicit trafficking, imprisonment and rehabilitation spending, as well as productivity loss from young talents.

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ACQUISITION OF MILITARY ASSETS

Transfer of technology can help us produce high-skilled workers



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THE advancement in allied weaponry, military operations, battlefield preparations and defence budget must be carefully planned.

For the sake of security, these settlements need to be based on meticulous and solid judgments that are divided between military technological invention and innovation.

Such rapidly improving technologies may warrant huge investment and provide new opportunities, especially in building our defence trust.

However, strong research and development policies will contribute to the securing of our national defence programme or any military-related project.

For illustration, any selected contractor appointed through an open tender would obtain most government budget military assets.

For example, the latest closed tender, 18 Light Combat Aircrafts (LCA), to be acquired by the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF), would contribute to another milestone in this country.

As the normal practice, Malaysia would offer our resources, such as palm oil products, as the payment method once the deal is set.

If we look into this purchase, the cost of one LCA would be around RM222.22 million, and the total acquisition would cost RM4 billion, where half of the sale will be paid according to the stated trade.

A similar situation is presumed with weaponry systems, such as missiles, rocket launchers and armaments.

On the other hand, sophisticated weaponry systems demand a tremendous level of automation or autonomy that can deliver intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance

duties to endure in any circumstance, be it in air, land or sea.

Several stealth combination features, such as network-enabled capability, electronic attachment, countermeasures, weapon systems with self-protection, speed and manoeuvrability, would be established to fulfil these requirements.

For the record, in the 2020 Budget, the Defence Ministry was allocated RM15.6 billion, while in the 2021 Budget the ministry was allocated about RM16 billion.

In comparison, the allocation for the 2022 Budget should be higher, but there was not much increment with a total allocation of RM16.14 billion, even with RMAF's Capability Development 2055 initiative and the Royal Malaysian Navy's 15-to-5 transformation programme.

Looking at ancient history, the Islamic Army, in its early stage, did not have the mechanism or tools to break down city walls or fences. These tools are only owned by the armies of the great empires of the era, namely Rome and Persia.

Thus, Prophet Muhammad sent two people, 'Urwah bin Mas'ud and Ghailan bin Salamah to Jaray (a city in Damascus under Byzantine rule), to discover the methods of manufacturing a trebuchet.

Here, the prophet taught us that acquiring new military tactics and strategies through the technology transfer process is inherent in expanding knowledge to improve the military for defence programmes.

Malaysia should use this example to enhance our capabilities in producing high-skilled workers, such as professional engineers and technical labourers, via the transfer-of-technology setup.

Technology transfer would hasten the development of skilled workers and complex types of machinery.

If this interest is to be realised, the programme itself will be an offset programme, where half of the planned quantity will be readied by the manufacturer.

At the same time, the remaining quantity would be manufactured in Malaysia to train the

country's industry experts.

It must be noted that building the aircraft industry is not easy due to the separate manufacturing processes of aircraft components, such as the wing, fuselage, control surfaces, landing gears, engine and others.

From that perspective, the government should make an investment by providing a special allocation from the annual budget to build in-house assembly facilities through the collaboration of military organisations, defence military contractors and industries, as well as universities, and technical colleges in Malaysia.

Consequently, our technical and vocational education and training programmes would benefit greatly and become a new game-changer, instead of just a one-off deal contract between the higher authorities of this country and could relinquish the level of apprenticeship.

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