Focus on doing charitable activities instead of umrah trips



By Dzulkifli Abdul Razak - January 5, 2022 @ 12:00am



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The decision to temporarily suspend umrah trips beginning Jan 8 for an indefinite period is a bold and timely one. This in view of the high number of Covid-19 Omicron variant cases discovered among those returning from Makkah.

The Covid-19 figures are concerning as up to Dec 30, more than 11,100 umrah returnees had arrived in Malaysia, and about 12 per cent were found to be positive.

By the next day, Dec 31, two more Omicron cases were confirmed, giving a total of 64 nationwide. Only one was reported to be a local transmission, the rest were from overseas. Half of them were umrah returnees.

In all, there were nine clusters involving the returnees, with five confirmed Omigran clusters and presumptive while the rest non-Omigran

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Given the large numbers of umrah pilgrims of more than 800 daily from four special flights, the risk of Omicron brought into the country cannot be taken lightly, especially with regard to quarantine procedures that are not strictly adhered to.

This has now been turned into mandatory quarantine starting Jan 3 onwards to be managed by the National Disaster Management Agency (Nadma). Other new requirements imposed include doing Covid-19 RT-PCR tests two days before departure, on arrival, and on the fifth day of quarantine.

If the results are negative, they are allowed to leave quarantine on the eighth day. Failing to conform may entail being subjected to legal procedures under the appropriate Act.

While these new actions look prohibitive, it must be weighed against the World Health Organisation's warning that Omicron can overwhelm the healthcare ecosystem because of the reported highly transmissible state, although said to be less severe symptomatically.

It recommends countries to continue to implement effective public health measures to reduce the spread of Covid-19. Inequalities in access to vaccines must be addressed urgently.

Since even those who were already vaccinated or those who recovered from the infection are not spared, it is imperative to keep physical distancing of at least 1m.

Admittedly, it is difficult to ensure strict practices on the ground during umrah, especially among those not well-informed or less aware coming from different cultures and expectations.

Be that as it may, umrah, unlike the haj, is not an obligatory act. More so, umrah has witnessed several repeat visits by individuals on periodic basis.

While this is not necessarily discouraged, but considering the Omicron situation, one should review the practice as it is done today.

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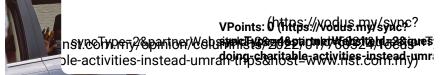
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spent on those who are in dire need, given the pandemic that is still raging.

In fact, many more would be deserving from such initiatives throughout the country as a form of desirable charity. What is more, involving floodprone areas causing untold sufferings namely, among the vulnerable nationwide while resources are wanting. This is deemed to be better blessed in the eyes of Allah SWT.

Better still if these are done out of sheer compassion and empathy in the name of the Almighty just as one would in doing umrah.

That is to say with the same level of commitment, sacrifice and humility as mercy to all.

In this way, we can reduce if not eliminate the nonsensical and sensational attitudes that went viral almost endlessly during this difficult span of time.

At the same, we can spare the inadvertent waste of scarce resources, highly strained relationships and the loss of confidence with the relevant authorities.

In a nutshell, umrah is not about a destination. More significantly, it is a journey to be that human-person who is worthy in the sight of the Creator.

Because at the end of the day, it is a means to shape and nurture attitudes, norms and cultures that is gained through the multitude of spiritual experiences accessible with full impact. And then readily manifested anytime and everywhere at the end of it all.

As such, despair not with the recent developments because umrah is more of a spiritual consciousness beyond mere physical awareness alone. Take heart!

The writer, an NST columnist for more than 20 years, is International Islamic University Malaysia rector

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the New Straits Times

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