



MEDIA RELEASE

LIES AND RUMOUR MONGERING ON **NOVEL CORONAVIRUS 2019-nCoV**

The importance of truth can never be over-emphasised. Whether in private dealings or in the public and national affairs of the state, truth is paramount. When times of epidemic or pandemic crisis occur in any society, it is critical that truthful and honest statements are issued by health authorities on a regular and prompt basis so that the millions of individuals who make up a society can themselves make informed decisions relating to their own health and safety, and that of their loved ones. No society can permit truth to be a casualty in such circumstances.

When epidemics occur, panic must be prevented among the citizenry. Instead, calmness and firmness of authority should guide the people on the origins, scale and magnitude of the epidemic. Lies about the origins, scale and magnitude of the disease must not be permitted because they endanger public safety. That rumour mongering is repugnant to common decency is most pronounced at such times in our national life. The credibility of the internet as the pre-eminent source of news and information is therefore vital.

It is against this background that as Public Prosecutor, I take very seriously the incredible volume of lies relating to the “coronavirus” epidemic gripping the attention of Malaysians, and, indeed, across the globe. Accordingly, I have decided that it is in the national interest that persons who initiate and disseminate lies on any issue relating to “coronavirus” on the internet shall be investigated, and if a case exists, be charged.

No freedom is absolute in any society at any point of time in history. The constitutionally entrenched guarantees of free speech and expression and the statutorily guaranteed right not to censor the internet stated in Section 3(3) of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 do not give a license to propagate lies.

This phenomenon is compounded by our obsession to introduce racial or religious overtones into every issue of public life. Hence, lies on the internet connecting “coronavirus” to any particular ethnic or religious group is not only deplorable, but inflammatory in our plural society of numerous ethnic and religious groups.

The Police and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (“MCMC”) are working closely with officers in this Chambers. Charges will be made against the individuals concerned in the coming days.

Section 233 of the **Communications and Multimedia Act 1998** is one option. However, the elements required to be satisfied by Prosecution before a person can be convicted by a Court under that provision do not fit into the category of offences that have been committed in recent times. It is clear that Section 233 should be the subject of Parliamentary amendment, hopefully soon.

Accordingly, the individuals concerned will be charged under Section 505(b) of the **Penal Code** which governs statements relating to public mischief. The key elements in this provision, which has been part of our criminal laws for decades, are the making or circulation of any statement or rumour which may cause fear or alarm resulting in anyone being induced to commit an offence against public tranquillity.

This Chambers, working with the Police, MCMC and other governmental agencies, is determined to prevent the spread of false statements concerning the “coronavirus”. Our health authorities must be allowed to deal with the problem in a calm and measured manner, without having to cope with extraneous matters.

Tan Sri Tommy Thomas
Public Prosecutor / Attorney General
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