

1. OUR CONTINUED FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19

In May 2021, Singapore re-tightened its COVID-19 measures under the Phase 2 (Heightened Alert) due to the rise in community cases and the spread of the B1617 variant. In the past weeks, Ministers Lawrence Wong and Gan Kim Yong, co-chairs of the Multi-Ministry Task Force, as well as Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, made various statements to explain the situation. Here are the key points:

Singapore is currently on the “knife-edge”.

- The community case numbers in Singapore could rise or fall in the following weeks. On 11 May, Minister Wong urged all Singaporeans to do their part by cutting back on social activities and staying at home as much as possible.

We are in a better position than last year.

- Singapore has expanded our testing capacity, and apps allow for quicker contact tracing. Vaccination has also allowed us to protect vulnerable groups and frontline workers.
- On 11 May, Minister Gan said that Singapore will continue to learn, build new capabilities, and **remain nimble** in responding to the evolving situation.

We cannot afford to close our borders permanently.

- On 4 May, Minister Wong said that as Singapore has limited resources and relies on migrant workers, we have taken a “risk-based approach”. We rely on quarantines and vaccines, instead of border measures, to control the spread of COVID-19.

We will need to learn to live with COVID-19.

- In an interview on 10 May, Dr Balakrishnan said that vaccination is critical but not sufficient. As waves of infection come and go, Singaporeans need to get used to oscillations between tightened and relaxed measures.
- The key lesson is **not to be complacent**. We will maintain “careful watchfulness” while restructuring the economy, keeping the virus at bay, and helping people keep jobs.

[Sources: ST, 4 May; MFA, 10 May; CNA, MOE & MOH, 11 May;]

No Place for Racism and Xenophobia

- In early May, accounts of racially-motivated attacks targeting individuals of South Asian descent surfaced online, drawing strong reactions from Singaporeans.
- PM Lee Hsien Loong and other ministers expressed their disappointment towards the attacks, emphasising that there is **no place for racism in Singapore** and what our multiracial society stands for.
- At Parliament on 11 May, Minister for Law and Home Affairs K Shanmugam said that **open expressions of racism and xenophobia should be condemned**, as both will become “normalised if we are not careful.” Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth Alvin Tan added that as a multi-racial and multi-religious country, Singapore “**denounces all forms of racism**”, as “**hate crimes and speech [...] threaten the harmony we worked hard over generations to build**”.



“*This is not a Chinese virus or Indian variant. This is a global pandemic – the virus and its variants are out there everywhere in the world. So there is **no place for discrimination, racism or xenophobia here in Singapore. We must continue to stand together, look out for each other, so that we can all get through this together.***”

– Minister Lawrence Wong in his Ministerial Statement on 11 May

[Sources: TODAY, 10 and 11 May;]

2. EXTENDING HELP TO OUR NEIGHBOURS-IN-NEED

Medical oxygen in India has been in severe shortage as the country grapples with a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving millions of people infected and putting stress on the country's overtaxed healthcare system. Singapore reached out to India to offer support and aid. These initiatives, arranged at short notice, are **testament to the close collaboration and partnership across multiple agencies** on both sides, and reflected Singapore's role as a "critical partner" to India. Singapore:



Image: Vivian Balakrishnan / Facebook

Assisted in airlifting four cryogenic tanks



Image: Dr Maliki Osman Facebook

Delivered medical supplies to India



Image: Vivian Balakrishnan / Facebook

Sent 256 oxygen cylinders via RSAF C-130 planes



Image: Giving.sg

Helped to raise over S\$3.2million

At the send-off of humanitarian aid at Paya Lebar Air Base on 28 Apr, Second Minister for Education and Foreign Affairs Dr Maliki Osman reaffirmed both countries' strong bilateral relations and said that **Singaporeans stand in solidarity with India in its fight against the pandemic.**

At Parliament on 11 May, Dr Balakrishnan said that Singapore was amongst the first countries to send medical supplies and humanitarian aid to India, reaffirming the **mutual commitment to support each other** during the pandemic.

"We have all witnessed in the past year how this pandemic is a transboundary threat. It gives no regard for country, nationality, or race. This is exactly why we must work collectively to support each other."

– Dr Maliki at Paya Lebar Air Base on 28 Apr

[Sources: ST, CNA, MFA, and Singapore Red Cross, 28 Apr; MFA; 1 May; MFA; 10 May; Hindustan Times, 14 May; ST; 12 May; ST, 17 May]

3. ASEAN CENTRALITY AMIDST THE MYANMAR CRISIS

On 24 Apr, ASEAN leaders reached a five-point consensus on tackling the political crisis in Myanmar during an ASEAN summit held in Jakarta, Indonesia. **ASEAN played the role of a mediator**, to open the potential for negotiations aimed at giving the people of Myanmar a chance to decide their own future.

The emergency meeting came after weeks of shuttle diplomacy by several ASEAN foreign ministers, and was a **testament to ASEAN's convening power.** In response, General Min Aung Hlaing said that "he had **heard the other ASEAN leaders**, and would take the points in, which he considered helpful." General Min was also **not opposed to ASEAN playing a constructive role**, or an ASEAN delegation visit, or humanitarian assistance.



Image: Muhyiddin Yassin and Lee Hsien Loong / Facebook

Five-Point Consensus:

- ASEAN leaders agreed on:
 1. An immediate cessation of violence
 2. Constructive dialogue
 3. A special envoy ("of the ASEAN chair") to facilitate mediation
 4. Humanitarian assistance through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre)
 5. A visit of the special envoy and delegation to Myanmar to meet all parties

"Silence and inaction would undermine ASEAN's centrality, credibility, and relevance.

Ultimately, Myanmar's future must be determined by its own people But ASEAN can, and wishes to, play a constructive role to facilitate a durable and peaceful negotiated political solution and Myanmar's return to normalcy and stability."

– PM Lee at the meeting on 24 Apr

[Sources: ST, CNA, Malay Mail, and MFA, 24 Apr; ST, 25 Apr; MFA, 10 May]

4. CONFLICT BETWEEN ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

In May 2021, tensions between Israelis and Palestinians intensified across Israel and the Palestinian Territories of the West Bank and Gaza. Here are the key events:

- For weeks, before and during the holy month of Ramadan, there were nightly protests in East Jerusalem against the Israeli court’s planned expulsion of Palestinian families from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, which are on land claimed by Jewish settlers.
- **On 7 May**, the violence escalated, with clashes between Palestinians and Israeli police in the compound of Al-Aqsa Mosque on the last Friday of Ramadan. Al-Aqsa Mosque, in East Jerusalem, sits on a site sacred to Christians, Muslims, and Jews, and is a chronic flash point in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- **On 10 May**, Hamas fired seven rockets from the Gaza Strip at Jerusalem following the clashes at Al-Aqsa Mosque, drawing Israeli air strikes in return.
- **This exchange of fire continued for 11 days**, with hundreds killed, mostly in Gaza, and heavy destruction of property. The violence was considered the most intense since Israel’s seven-week invasion of Gaza in 2014.
- **On 21 May**, an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire between Israel and Hamas came into force.



This episode marks just one flashpoint in the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The roots of the conflict are complex and predate the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. Since 1948, there have been wars, uprisings, and also opportunities for peace between Israel and Palestine.

Reactions from Singapore:

- In a statement released on 12 May, Singapore’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) expressed concern about the civilian casualties and called upon all parties to **cease attacks against civilian targets** and prevent further loss of lives or injuries. MFA also urged all sides to take immediate steps to **de-escalate the situation** and work towards a durable ceasefire. It emphasised that all parties have a responsibility to stop the violence and protect the safety and security of civilians.
- In a Facebook post on 13 May, Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said that **“the conflict strengthens the hand of the hardliners on both sides”** and will not bring security to the region. He underscored the dangers of a new phase of violent conflict within Israel, between Arab Israelis and Jews. He urged a de-escalation of conflict and to restart the peace process – otherwise the conflict will remain **“an open wound, with repeated outbreaks, and repeated suffering. And no winner.”**

“*[Singaporeans] should also not let emotions lead us to advocate policies that erode the principle of the right to self-defence in a way that could one day rebound against ourselves.*”

– Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan
in his commentary on 21 May

Scan the QR code to read the commentary by Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan.



[Sources: Reuters, 8 May; New York Times, 10 May; Reuters, 11 May; ST, 12 and 13 May; CNA, 17 May; NPR, 19 May; CNA and ST, 21 May; Al Jazeera, 22 May]

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