

The New York Times

White flags fly in Malaysia as hunger spreads during lockdown.

Signs of economic distress have begun appearing in neighborhoods across Kuala Lumpur and other Malaysian cities: white flags outside people's houses, indicating that they need food or other assistance.

The flags — sometimes little more than T-shirts or strips of cloth — are a cry for help from mostly low-income families who are financially affected by the another long coronavirus lockdown. The campaign, shared on social media as #benderaputih ("white flag"), is a way for families to appeal for food, work or other essentials as many businesses remain closed and joblessness rises.

Thousands of people have stepped in, including artists and celebrities. A rapper who goes by Altimet pledged to his nearly 400,000 followers on Instagram last week that, every Friday, he would donate food and supplies to houses marked with a white flag.

Renyi Chin, a restaurant owner in Kuala Lumpur, the capital, said he had donated \$1,000 worth of food and supplies to families in the past week.

"This is our fourth lockdown, and many have lost their jobs and means for food," Mr. Chin said. Many of those afflicted by the latest restrictions are single mothers, older Malaysians and daily wage workers, he added.

As coronavirus cases continue to rise in Malaysia, with average daily infections up 19 percent in the last two weeks, according to New York Times data, the government on Saturday announced a tightening of restrictions in several regions, including Kuala Lumpur and most of Selangor state. The country had 6,539 daily cases last week, and just 8 percent of its population is fully vaccinated, according to Times data.

Malaysia's repeated lockdowns have lowered demand for labor, with the number of registered jobs dropping by 130,000 in just the first quarter of the year, according to government data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia. Suicides have risen during the first five months of this year, and the health ministry said that the pandemic is partly to blame.

Many in Malaysia say the government has failed to manage the economic impact of the pandemic. Outside some houses, black flags have appeared in a separate campaign calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin.

"We're in our fourth lockdown and yet the cases are rising," Mr. Chin said. "Something isn't right."

Members of the governing party have dismissed the campaign, with one lawmaker, Nik Abduh Nik Aziz, asking people to pray instead of waving flags. "Don't admit defeat when being tested by teaching the people to raise a white flag," he said in a Facebook post last week.

Zuraida Kamaruddin, the minister for housing and local government, voiced support for the campaign in a tweet, writing: “There is no need to beg and no need to be embarrassed. Just raise the flag.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/06/world/malaysia-white-flags.html>