



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

檳城消費人協會 பிளாங்கு பயனீட்டாளர் சங்கம்

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Press Statement

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RESTRICT ALCOHOL SALE!

In the wake of the recent 51 methanol poisoning cases in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor (as of 19 September 2018) cases of which 19 people died and 14 others in a critical state, the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) is not surprised at all. How did this adulterated alcohol ended up on shelves? It is because we have been urging the authorities over the past four decades to take a tough stand on the control of alcohol sale but the calls have fallen on deaf ears and getting a knee-jerk reaction when incidents like this happened. It is a known fact that some shops are selling smuggled booze.

Such methanol poisoning is not the first neither would it be the last because it had happened in 1977 (18 deaths), 1979 (21 deaths), and 1981 (32 deaths). The reason for this is the adulteration of samsu, beers, or liquor with cheap but poisonous methanol (commercially sold as methylated spirit).

In 2005, the Thais spontaneously took to the streets in Bangkok, Thailand, to protest against the application for a stock market listing by Thailand's biggest brewer and distiller. They succeeded with the rejection of the brewer's submission.

This was the result of the Thais noticing that families broke up, students' failing grades, the number of accidents related to drunk driving, and fights that happened after guzzling alcohol.

Almost 20 per cent (13 million) of the Thais signed up a petition in support of Thailand's Alcohol Beverage Control Act when it was first proposed. We wish to congratulate Thais for their stand against their intense want of a healthy society free from alcohol and to use their money on food and other necessities for their family instead.

Just like the Thais, Malaysians should take ownership of issues affecting them rather than adopting the 'tidak apa' attitude. We also want to appeal to our policy makers to make or amend laws more stringent to curb alcohol sale as we can see now that alcohol outlets are mushrooming and operating with little monitoring by the authorities.

We call for a tough restriction on alcohol on six broad grounds:

1. Alcohol poses as health risk.
2. Social ills resulting from alcohol intoxication;
3. Road accidents related to alcohol consumption;
4. Unnecessary expenditure on alcohol consumption that could have been diverted to family budget;
5. Alcohol-related domestic violence; and
6. Prevention of methanol poisoning as it can result in death.

The harms that alcohol wrought to society demand our attention. Although the government raised the minimum legal age for the consumption of alcohol from 18 to 21 on 1 December 2017, it has not addressed the problems

related to it. A very glaring example is that it is impossible to monitor if the numerous alcohol retail outlets are adhering to the verification of the age of suspiciously young purchasers.

It has been estimated that in 2016, there were 2 billion people worldwide who consumed alcohol beverages and 2.8 million people died of alcohol-related causes.

Malaysian statistics show that per capita alcohol consumption (litres per year) is worrying. It has been increasing from 0.8 litres per year in 2005; 1.2 litres in 2010; to 1.7 litres in 2015. In 2011, Kuala Lumpur had the highest number of current drinkers at about 154,200 (19.3 per cent) of the population; Sarawak, 440,000 (17.8 per cent); Sabah/Labuan, 526,440 (16.4 per cent); and Penang, 221,520 (14.2 per cent).

Moreover, those earning less than RM3,000 (3.0 per cent) and those living in the rural areas (284,160 of the population) tend to spend more of their income on alcohol than the general urban population (681,790 population) in 2016. Of those in the general population who took alcohol, the youngest age group detected was between 13 and 14 years-old.

It is a worrying development because those earning below RM3,000 are supposed to be under the B40 category. Their smoking and/or drinking jeopardise their expenditure on food and other essentials for the family. According to a 2016 report, Malaysians spend more than RM2 billion on alcohol annually, making it the 10th largest consumer in the world.

Alcohol consumption causes no less than a dozen diseases such as anaemia, cardiovascular diseases, cirrhosis, dementia, gout, and it also increases the risk of cancer. In 2012, it was attributed to 30.8 per cent of liver cirrhosis in males and 28.6 per cent in females; and the Road Safety Council estimated that drunk driving caused 30 per cent of road accidents nationwide with 38 per cent of these resulted in fatalities.

A study had also shown that absenteeism from workplace related to alcohol consumption is 16 times higher than for some other reasons.

As such we are proposing:

- Alcohol outlets should not to be permitted within a 500m radius around any housing area, hospital, educational and religious institution.
- Alcohol should not be sold at Perwira Niaga Malaysia (Pernama), retail outlets that serve Malaysian Armed Forces since 1983.
- The opening hours of outlets that serve alcohol be restricted, e.g. from 1pm till 9pm, and furniture such as tables and chairs should not be placed outside the outlet (including five-foot way).
- Introduce mandatory jail sentence for those who sells smuggled or adulterated alcohol on which duty that has not paid duty.
- Impose Sin Tax on alcohol (just as for cigarettes) and use it for health promotion purposes by the Malaysia Health Promotion Board (MHPB).
- Forbid the sale of duty-free cigarettes and alcohol, even at airports.
- Total ban of alcohol advertisements.

We propose that Sin Tax be imposed on alcohol the same way as is done on tobacco and cigarettes so that the tax can be used to fund health and educational programmes related to the dangers of alcohol consumption and smoking. Programmes can be carried out by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with fundings disbursed by the Malaysia Health Promotion Board (MHPB). MHPB was established in 2006. Alcohol consumption has to be de-normalised for a healthier Malaysia.

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