

The Straits Times says

Strengthening ties across Causeway

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's arrival in Singapore on Monday, on his first official visit here since he took office in November, reaffirms the benefits of close links between the two countries. They are bound by geography, a shared history, and deep familial and cultural ties. These links produce a relationship "quite unlike any other", in the welcoming words of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Indeed, as he noted, the destinies of Singapore and Malaysia are intertwined. When they work together constructively, they produce win-win outcomes with tangible benefits for their citizens.

In that spirit of concrete cooperation, the two leaders witnessed the signing of three memorandums of understanding aimed at promoting

cooperation in new and emerging areas, specifically on green and digital economies, and cyber security. A significant detail is that, as Malaysia's first green economy agreement signed with any country, the partnership is expected to strengthen collaboration to de-carbonise both countries' industries and to help businesses and workers to seize opportunities in the green economy. In the vanguard area of managing environmental change, strong bilateral relationships make a substantial contribution to the evolution of international norms and protocols that extend the ecological span of economic and social life on earth.

Likewise, the digital economy framework of cooperation breaks new ground by seeking to

enhance cooperation beyond what is spelt out in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, two trade agreements to which both Singapore and Malaysia are signatories. The agreement in the field of personal data protection, cyber security and the digital economy will facilitate the exchange of knowledge, expertise and best practices in areas such as data protection policies and cross-border data flows, tackling common cyber security threats, and emerging technology such as artificial intelligence. This is another frontier towards which Malaysia and Singapore can and must travel together.

Frontiers matter for all nations. But for Singapore and Malaysia, they matter a great deal because, only by moving towards the future together can they overcome being held hostage by the past. Singapore's Separation from Malaysia in 1965 to become an independent nation is an unalterable fact of history. Both nations ought to be lauded for recognising their mutual interests and cooperating so as to hold their own in an uncertain world. Asean benefits from closer synergies among its members. What Malaysia and Singapore require is the continuation of decisive leadership that looks ahead to cement ties, much as the Causeway and the Second Link connect two geographies physically.

Giving way to an ambulance using siren must always be a priority

Drivers here need a greater appreciation of the life and death stakes involved



Salma Khalik

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A letter in The Straits Times Forum page by 12-year-old Avishi Gurnani on Jan 9 raises a very pertinent question: Why do some vehicles here not give way to an ambulance that has lights on and siren wailing?

She was sharing a recent experience. The taxi she was in gave way to an ambulance immediately, but she noticed that several other vehicles did not.

Avishi said: "I believe most, if not all, Singaporeans are aware that lives are at stake when emergency services are required.

"This is especially so with stroke victims, who need to receive medical attention within a few minutes, or with fires when ambulances need to arrive at the scene to treat the injured."

For stroke patients, every minute counts. Delays in treatment could result in permanent damage to their brain, which in turn could affect their speech, mobility and thought processes.

Even a young girl like Avishi knows this. So why do some drivers, who are adults, not do the right thing?

One could argue that the current fines are too low to deter them. But should one even require the threat of a penalty to save someone's life just by giving way to an ambulance? Or are such drivers simply blind to the consequences of their actions?



Let's address that first. It is a potentially lethal blind spot.

EVERY MINUTE COUNTS

A driver once told me he sees so many ambulances with blaring sirens on the roads that he no longer takes them seriously. He needs to realise that ambulances have their lights and sirens on only when the patient they are ferrying is an emergency case who probably requires immediate specialist attention.

And if we do hear ambulance sirens frequently, it is because the Singapore Civil Defence Force ambulances alone carry about 200,000 emergency cases a year. For some, such as those who have fractures, a delay may merely prolong their pain. But for the 20,000 people here each year who suffer a stroke or heart

attack, it could mean the difference between life and death – or in the quality of their life, if they survive.

Dr Ang Hou, who heads the Emergency Department at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, said: "For collapsed patients whose heart has stopped, it becomes even more crucial to intervene as soon as possible. Chances of survival drop an estimated 10 per cent with every minute when cardiopulmonary resuscitation is not done. Delays in advanced intervention in a hospital mean a higher likelihood of non-survival or survival with a poor neurological outcome."

Dr Liu Hui Ling, an emergency medicine specialist at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, said: "Time is brain; time is heart. Without treatment, every minute that passes can lead to greater

irreversible brain and heart tissue damage."

She added that for stroke patients, a delay in giving medication could increase the risk of complications such as life-threatening bleeding; while for heart patients, every 15-minute delay in unblocking the blood vessel supplying the heart increases the risk of death.

Her colleague, Dr Malcolm Ong, said that for someone who has suffered a heart attack, "irreversible brain damage can occur after four to six minutes of impaired blood flow to the brain".

Other patients for whom every minute counts include victims of major accidents, someone suffering from profuse gastrointestinal bleeding, and even patients whose blood pressure has plummeted.

And yet, many drivers – either

of ignorance or sheer callousness – overlook the harm they can cause patients by obstructing ambulances. Some even use ambulance sirens to speed up their own journeys. In doing so, they fall foul of the law.

ARE THE PENALTIES TOO LIGHT?

In 2019, the fines for obstructing emergency vehicles were raised from \$130 to \$150 for light vehicles and from \$160 to \$200 for heavy vehicles. Drivers also get four demerit points. If there are aggravating factors, the offender can be fined up to \$1,000, jailed for up to three months, or both. Honestly, given that people's lives are at stake, the penalty seems rather low, which may be one reason the problem persists.

The law states that traffic must always give way to emergency

vehicles when their sirens are on – not just ambulances but also fire engines and police vehicles, whose sirens are allowed only when there is an emergency.

Most drivers do give way to ambulances. But some tend to be slow in doing so. These drivers wait till the ambulance is almost tail-gating their vehicle before moving to the left lane, as they take advantage of the clear lane ahead that other vehicles have vacated to allow the ambulance to pass.

Sometimes, drivers on the left lane make it difficult for other vehicles to filter in, again delaying the clearance of the lane where an ambulance is rushing a patient to hospital.

There is probably no penalty for doing that since these drivers are not directly in front of the ambulance. But it does add to the time it takes to get a critically ill patient to a hospital.

But should our behaviour on the road be dictated only by the penalties we potentially face?

ETIQUETTE AND EMPATHY

A colleague told me how he had noticed very different etiquette when he was driving in Germany. There, cars slowed down and pulled aside long before the ambulance arrived, allowing the ambulance to speed all the way to the hospital.

I remember driving in Kuala Lumpur, where vehicles pulled onto the kerbside to allow an ambulance to speed by. I was shocked. I used to think Malaysian drivers were aggressive. That incident showed me that yes, they may be aggressive in cutting into lanes to be just that much faster – but when it comes to people's lives, they know to give way.

What happened in Germany and Malaysia likely stems from a mindset that empathises with the patient being rushed to hospital, about putting the urgent needs of others above your own trivial convenience. Laws alone cannot dictate that.

As Dr Ang said: "With every minute that passes after a heart attack or stroke, more heart muscle or brain tissue will die." Remember that the next time you see an ambulance with lights on and siren blaring.

Imagine being in the shoes of someone who hears a doctor saying their loved ones could still be alive if only they had reached the hospital just minutes earlier.

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Long-held attitudes do not change quickly

FROM B1

and medium-sized enterprises and the open innovation platform. Such initiatives may be extended or enhanced and new ones introduced in the upcoming Budget.

PRODUCTIVITY CHALLENGES

But despite all the best efforts, it might still be difficult for some

companies to quickly raise productivity, which has remained stubbornly low in most service-oriented sectors in Singapore, at least until 2019. So such firms must be ready to accept that wage growth for low-wage workers may run ahead of productivity increases, at least in the short term.

To sustain their commitment to the PWM, they will need to cut costs in other areas, such as

rentals (which usually account for higher costs than low-end wages) and other non-wage costs as well as introduce greater progressivity in wages within their companies by reducing increments and bonuses for higher-paid workers relative to their lesser-paid colleagues.

Nor will all low-wage workers be able to easily adapt, learn new skills and take on more responsibilities.

The Tripartite Report points out that nearly half of them are aged 55 and over, most of whom do not have post-secondary education.

Some workers could also be vulnerable to layoffs resulting from automation – especially in the manufacturing sector – and

may not be quickly able to move to sectors where new jobs are being created, which could prolong job mismatches.

This means that other forms of income support such as the Workfare Income Supplement as well as assistance for retrenched workers and training subsidies will need to continue or even increase. Even radical options for those seeking work, such as job guarantees underwritten by the Government may need to be considered.

Companies will also need to address the conundrum of what to pay their foreign workers, to whom the PWM or the LQS do not apply.

Such a discriminatory policy

might make political sense, but for companies it can be problematic if foreign workers doing the same jobs as local workers are paid less and are therefore differently incentivised. This is usually not the case in other advanced economies that employ foreign workers, who also get the minimum wage where it is in force. Wage discrimination may also go against the conventions of the International Labour Organisation.

Raising wages at the lower end of the income scale is important to reduce the economic vulnerabilities that low-wage workers may face in the years ahead. In what is likely to be a more inflationary era going

forward, they will be the hardest hit by increases in prices as well as mortgage and rental costs.

Higher pay for low-wage workers would make Singapore's economy more broad-based and resilient.

Besides helping the workers achieve higher living standards, it would benefit domestically focused businesses, especially in the heartland. It would also raise Singapore's share of consumption to gross domestic product – which at just over 40 per cent is among the lowest in the world – and would be a big step towards a more egalitarian society and a stronger social compact.

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THE STRAITS TIMES

An SPH Media Limited publication

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