

On December 31, 2019, while everyone was getting ready to herald in the new decade of the 2020s, the World Health Organisation (WHO) received reports about an unknown respiratory infection outbreak in Wuhan.

While news of this flu-like illness began to creep out of China, little did the world realise what the months ahead would bring. Most of us went about the business of daily living, occasionally keeping track of what it was, in fact, a growing threat, but feeling quite comfortable where we were.

We watched, perhaps a bit distantly at first, how China started locking down its residents, sympathised with the patients, victims and families, and marveled at the Chinese building a dedicated 1,000-bed hospital in Wuhan in just over a week.

All along, while China seemed far away from the rest of the world - or so we thought - this minuscule virus was making its way around the globe, swiftly making its presence felt.

The US confirmed its first case on 21 January 2020, Singapore on 23 January and Malaysia on 24 January, the same day China's figures stood at 840 cases with 25 deaths. A short month later, by the end of February, 56 countries had confirmed cases with a total global count of 84,090 and 2,874 deaths.

That was just the tip of the iceberg, and today, we have documented more than 254 million cases and more than 5.1 million deaths. Malaysia has recorded 2,546,309 cases and 29,676 deaths (as of December 2021).

## Changes and more

New Year's Eve of 2019 was practically the last normal celebration the world would see in some time as the eventually named SARS-CoV-2 virus quickly took over.

Declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020, it brought the world to a standstill. It shut doors, emptied city streets, kept loved ones from each other, decimated businesses and brought down economies, silencing the hustle and bustle of ordinary life.

We learned new everyday vocabulary - comorbidities, R-naught, case fatality rate, contact tracing, PPE, superspreader, ventilator, etc. The do's and don'ts of living with COVID-19 were drummed into us, and we were forced to adapt to what we called "new norms'.

We grew tired and fatigued.

While the toll on humanity and our lifestyle has been wide and great, COVID-19 has not been merely the harbinger of gloom and doom.

It made us STOP and change - for want of supposedly better things to do. Confined to our homes for work and play, we re-evaluated priorities; held back from window shopping and spending money on unessential items, we re-defined our values, wants and needs; and, unable to meet with loved ones, we appreciated them more.

Many discovered newfound or renewed interest in things they did not have time for. Gardening, cooking, baking, sewing, reading, and ves, watching Netflix and Chinese and Korean dramas filled up the days. Parents spent more time with children, and families ate meals together and even played together again. We had to think of new ways to continue working and educating our children.

However, though we were all in the same waters, we were not in the same boat. Some of us were fortunate enough to be able to literally smell the roses, while others worried and fretted about where the next meal was coming from. But this brought out altruism as we saw people banding together and offering help; businesses suffered, some reinvented themselves while many went under.

The medical and scientific fraternities learned much too. They created vaccines at an unprecedented speed and have taken us a step further in advancing treatment protocols as mRNA technology is now being explored to treat other diseases.

On another front, reduced human activity led to lower pollution, cleaner rivers and better air as people used less, travelled less, and produced fewer goods for periods of

## Stop, Look, Go

Indeed, we have waded through a quagmire of challenges and problems. It has also highlighted the world's unpreparedness to face medical emergencies such as these.

But there is hope that we are coming out of the tunnel. The protection of the COVID-19 vaccination has brought back some semblance of normalcy as more nations are resuming life as we knew it - well, in as much as possible, that is.

As we put the efficacy of the vaccines to the test amidst mutated virus strains, some countries are gingerly lifting travel restrictions, opening up economies and bringing back social activities and interaction. Some countries are still cautious and waiting for more confidence-bolstering results, while others are grappling with low vaccination rates that are still holding them back.

And yes, we still have larger outbreaks than we are comfortable with; people still get sick and die from COVID-19. We do not discount that nor take that lightly.

But the reality is that life goes on, just as it had after the earlier pandemics in our human history, such as the Spanish Flu. We are slowly coming to accept that COVID-19 is here to stay, and scientists are anticipating that it will be endemic.

While we do not have a clear picture of what the months ahead will bring as more and more countries return to "normal" life as it were, we move in the hope that the existing COVID-19 vaccines that we have and use will continue to lower the incidences of serious diseases, hospitalisations and deaths from SARS-CoV-2. Barring serious and fatal mutation strains, this is the best scenario we have. We depend on our scientists to continue their research into more effective vaccinations and perhaps, a

We also hope that this coronavirus will eventually become like some of the existing coronaviruses that cause about 20% of the colds we face - inconvenient, bothersome, debilitating and yes, sometimes fatal, but overall manageable as "just one of those things".

Meanwhile, it remains our responsibility to protect ourselves and our loved ones, and by extension, our community and beyond. COVID-19 has shown us how interdependent we are and how our actions and activities, both individuals and nations, have further-reaching consequences than we realised or even thought about.