



SINGAPORE
Reconstruction of Kusu Island shrines nearly done

Three Malay shrines on a century-old site at the top of a hill on Kusu Island are nearly 70 per cent reconstructed, and they will likely be ready for the yearly pilgrimage season, which begins at the end of this month. The three shrines, or keramat, were almost completely destroyed in a fire on April 17. **A12**



BUSINESS
Motor insurance sector hit by rising inflation

Rising inflation has hit the motor insurance sector but a battle for market share has helped to cushion a rise in premiums, said industry experts. Following AXA Singapore's exit from the motor insurance business earlier this year, the fight to tap this opportunity to capture new customers has intensified. **A20**

INSIGHT
Stem cell treatment for damaged knee cartilage

The use of stem cells derived from the bone marrow to regenerate damaged cartilage in the knees offers new hope to younger patients who suffer from cartilage degeneration. In a study at the National University Hospital, the use of stem cells has shown an 80 per cent success rate in two years. **B4**

Clementi landslide

Recovery works may take a few months

Surrounding buildings, structures inspected and found to be structurally sound: Minister

Amanda Lee
Consumer Correspondent

It may take a few months to repair the damage caused by the landslide at a Clementi Build-To-Order (BTO) site last Friday, said National Development Minister Desmond Lee on Sunday.

He added that the Building and Construction Authority (BCA), the Housing Board's engineers and the project's qualified person – either an architect or engineer – have inspected the surrounding buildings and structures at the site and found them structurally sound.

In the early hours of Friday, a landslide at the Clementi NorthArc construction site in

Clementi Avenue 6 damaged a section of the Ulu Pandan park connector and displaced soil into the Ulu Pandan Canal.

Over the past two days, HDB, the National Parks Board (NParks) and national water agency PUB have been working round the clock to carry out immediate repair and slope stabilisation recovery works, Mr Lee said.

The priority has been to mitigate the impact of the slope failure and ensure the safety of workers and the public, said the minister, who visited the area with Senior Minister of State for National Development Sim Ann on Sunday.

HDB and contractors have applied a thin layer of concrete to stabilise the slope.

They have also created a channel to allow water to flow through the

canal to mitigate any flood risks upstream, especially given the rainy weather.

"More permanent slope stabilisation measures are being carried out, followed by the main recovery and construction efforts, which may take a few months," said Mr Lee.

The recovery works include removing the dislodged soil in the canal, reinstating the damaged part of the park connector, and reconstructing the slope and retaining walls within the site.

BCA, the Ministry of Manpower and HDB are investigating the cause of the slope failure.

"In the meantime, safety remains our priority. We will continue to check the instrument readings deployed within and around the site to closely monitor structural safety throughout the entire recovery process," said Mr Lee.

On Sunday, NParks said a section of the park connector will remain closed, after an assessment

by the authorities. This section stretches between Boon Lay Way and Clementi Road and is nearer to the area of the slope failure.

Said NParks: "This is for public safety due to ongoing and planned recovery and repair works, and potential flood risks."

The park connector beyond the section – from Clementi Road to Commonwealth Avenue West, near Ghim Moh Road – has reopened.

NParks and PUB will closely monitor the rain forecast and water level in the canal and will temporarily close the park connector when necessary.

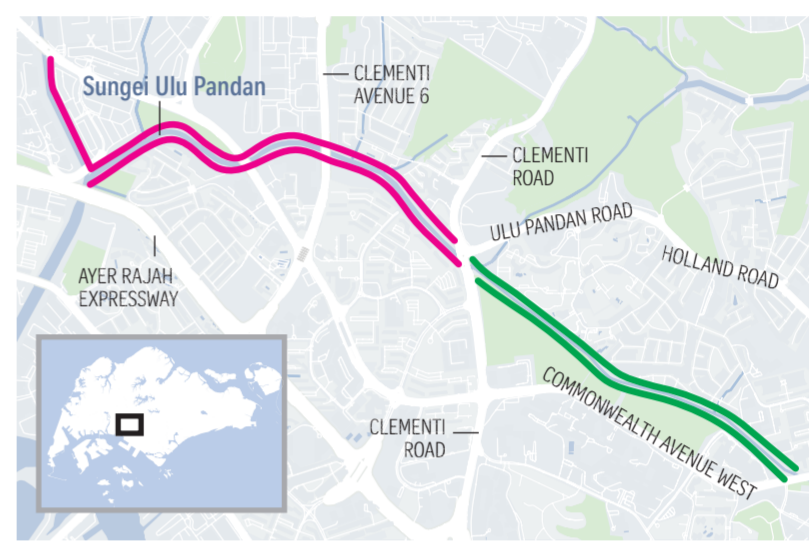
PUB advised the public to avoid using the park connector during heavy rain.

The Clementi NorthArc BTO project was launched in February 2017 and is estimated to be completed in the second half of this year.

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Partially opened

Stretch closed Stretch opened



Source: NPARKS STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS



Above: A closed entrance of the park connector in Clementi Road towards the direction of Boon Lay. NParks said a section of the park connector will remain closed, after an assessment by the authorities. This section stretches between Boon Lay Way and Clementi Road and is nearer to the area of the slope failure.



Right: People at the park connector from Clementi Road to Commonwealth Avenue West that has been reopened. PUB advised the public to avoid using the park connector during heavy rain. ST PHOTOS: CHONG JUN LIANG

NCID staff set for a breather after 2½ years of fighting Covid-19

After 2½ long years of battling Covid-19 on the front lines, staff at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) can finally take a break.

"This year, hopefully, we can allow most people to take a breather," said its executive director Leo Yee Sin.

"Many of our staff (have gone through) two to three years of continuous working, they have not been able to travel, they have not been able to go home... As and when there is breathing space, they will be the ones given priority to go home and rest."

These are the foreigners or Singaporeans with family overseas. Nurses have been bearing the brunt of the fight and are exhausted, she added.

"This is a period of catching up. Many of us could not clear our leave, so now is the period that you tell your staff to please get some rest and take your leave," said Professor Leo, who has not travelled since the start of Covid-19.

The situation at NCID reflects the staffing pressure in the general healthcare sector that has seen nurses quitting.

"Many of our nursing colleagues are from foreign countries. After two to three years, they are really, really longing to

go back to their home and we do not know when they will return," said Prof Leo.

"We have to respect that there is this long period where they were disconnected, so it's also very important for them to connect back with their family."

The Ministry of Health recently said the attrition rate of nurses across all hospitals in the first quarter of this year was 4.4 per cent. This is slightly higher than the same period in 2019, 2020 and last year, when rates ranged from 2.7 per cent to 3.3 per cent.

In late July, it gave more than 25,000 nurses working in the public sector a special bonus of 1.7 to 2.1 months of their base salary to try to retain them.

"Nurses are just short everywhere and our aim is to be able to... train the nurses. I still remember when we first started NCID, we had to recruit these fresh graduates... now they are in year three or four and they have grown so much," said Prof Leo.

NCID started operations in November 2018 and was officially opened in September 2019.

"I think for this period... manpower will be an issue... So we are happy to have young fresh graduates coming over to NCID, just like how we started."

Joyce Teo

Focus shifts to preparing for future disease outbreaks, with current ones under control

Joyce Teo
Senior Health Correspondent

At the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), the pressure to fight Covid-19 continued earlier this year when much of the public had grown tired of pandemic restrictions and having to watch out for an invisible enemy.

At the same time, it had to deal with the dengue outbreak. More than 25,500 cases have been recorded since the start of the year, compared with 5,258 for the whole of last year.

And by June, monkeypox had reached Singapore.

Now that Covid-19 restrictions have mostly been lifted, The Straits Times caught up with NCID executive director Leo Yee Sin recently to find out more on how it is coping with the current outbreaks and its preparations for a possible future Disease X.

Q Of the three outbreaks – Covid-19, dengue and monkeypox – which one worries you the most?

A I'm able to overcome my anxiety or fear of these conditions because we have a reasonable understanding of them. We have already put in place the ability to cope with the three conditions. What I need to worry about is what's going to come in the future, because

there is no form, no shape, nothing yet.

We want to strengthen NCID. There are a lot of things that we are doing, but it's not so much about doing something that is extraordinary. The important thing is how you add the elements together and make NCID stronger.

This year, for our third anniversary, we decided that after two to three years of fighting Covid-19, we would have a Family Day on Sept 3. When our staff were busy fighting the war, the people who stood behind them were their families.

Q What is the Covid-19 situation at NCID like now?

A Today, there are more than 200 Covid-19 cases in hospital, with about 60 of them at NCID. We typically take in about 20 per cent of the national load of cases.

We still have to stay alert because if a new strain pops up in another part of the world, it could end up here too. So we need to have this signal from all parts of the world. So, in an outbreak, or any situation concerning the region or the world, connections are key.

I used to spend my whole night, after working here, connecting with mostly the World Health Organisation to try to bring all the different regions together.

Now, we need to look into the fu-

ture. So it's no longer fighting fire but discussing what we have learnt and the future.

Q How is NCID coping with the dengue outbreak?

A To me, without a good vaccine, without good mosquito control strategies... it's going to be a long-haul battle with mosquitoes and the virus. So our hope is that in the future, we can have a vaccine or a very effective mosquito control technique.

(Dengvaxia is currently the only dengue vaccine approved in Singapore for individuals aged 12 to 45. However, it is not recommended for those who have had no prior infection, because of the increased risk of developing severe dengue should they get infected later in life.)

This year, or perhaps early next year, another dengue virus vaccine may become commercially available, but... you still need a lot of human effort as well as mosquito control.

What we have done through research is to understand the disease so that we bring only the cases that require hospital care into the hospital. The current admission rate of dengue is hovering somewhere around 10 per cent.

But the epidemiology is still changing, and we see more and more older people getting dengue. It's a different challenge.

Q Singapore has reported 16 monkeypox cases. None of them is now at NCID. Is monkeypox no longer a concern for Singapore?

A We have to anticipate that monkeypox may be endemic. In Singapore, monkeypox is likely to be a sporadic disease, and intermittent small clusters can be expected. The difficulty in situations like that is that you need to have very strong clinical suspicions to pick up cases, and then get them lab-tested.

Q Are you expanding your team, as Covid-19 is here to stay and Disease X can surface at any time?

A Manpower is a constant challenge in any healthcare institution. NCID is no exception. We have been given the support to further expand manpower in clinical care, but we haven't reached our target, so we still have vacancies.

In the interim, if something really big happens and that is beyond what the inherent manpower with NCID can cope, we will ask for help, and the closest partner will be Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

Q How would you describe life at NCID?

A This is a place where we support the nation in dealing with emerging infections... There will be a period where you know you really need to work very hard to get through the outbreak. And then you will have a down period, when you want to look at training and other things.

So perhaps, we can entice people to join, as this infectious disease speciality is actually a very interesting speciality... full of excitement and full of opportunities.

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