



PRESS CONFERENCE REMARKS

Update on COVID-19

**The Most Hon. Dr. Hubert Minnis
Prime Minister**

Sunday, 29 March 2020

Office of the Prime Minister

**Cecil Wallace Whitfield Building
West Bay Street
Nassau, Bahamas**

7:00 P. M.

Good evening.

I want to provide the country and the media with an update on our continuing efforts to respond to the health and economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 virus.

Health officials have confirmed three more cases on the island of New Providence.

There is a total of 14 confirmed cases of COVID-19 to date.

Two in Grand Bahama, and the remaining on New Providence.

Two of the COVID positive individuals have been admitted to Doctor's Hospital on Blake Road.

All other cases are doing well.

We have seen a doubling of confirmed cases over the last four days.

We anticipate more cases in a short period of time over the coming 20 days.

This suggests that we are at the beginning of an expected surge.

This means we must increase our efforts to restrict the spread of this virus and to save lives.

The Ministry of Health's Surveillance Unit has started the process of mapping COVID-19 cases to help identify potential clusters of cases and to inform the

Ministry's strategy to mitigate the spread of the virus in communities.

This will help to identify cases early and decrease the need for hospital-based services.

It is critical that each and every one of us take personal responsibility and do everything in our power to reduce the spread of this virus.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the increases in cases on a daily basis and respond accordingly.

Our response to COVID-19 is guided by the analysis and advice provided by the health professionals coordinating the response to this Coronavirus.

After my remarks, I will ask health officials to answer your questions.

I wish to announce that tomorrow the House of Assembly will meet to debate a Resolution to approve the continuance of the Emergency Powers (COVID-19) Regulations made on the 17th of March and the Emergency Powers (COVID-19) Orders made on 23rd of March until 8th of April, 2020.

The Resolution will ask for approval for the continuance of a state of emergency until 8th of April, 2020, inclusive of the

emergency powers and authority in the two Orders.

The Resolution extends the Emergency Proclamation for an additional eight days.

We must avoid speculation and rely on health officials to continue to advise where the country is in the fight against COVID-19.

As Prime Minister, and as a medical doctor I will act based on the facts and the best medical and scientific information possible.

I once again ask you to be guided by health officials and reliable information from credible sources.

Tragically, in Iran, approximately 300 hundred people have died from drinking

methanol, which is a toxic, industrial alcohol not intended for drinking purposes.

A false and fake report circulated in the country, which claimed that methanol could prevent COVID-19.

A media report described a 5-year-old boy who is now blind because his parents gave him methanol to drink because they believed the fake news about it is a way to prevent the virus.

False and fake information can lead to death and to harm.

Please do not pass on information that does not come from credible sources.

Yesterday, my Office became aware of a voice note circulating on social media that contained false claims that I would announce a country-wide 30-day shutdown on Monday.

That claim was fake news and false.

Such misinformation could have led to panic and a run on grocery stores and other establishments that could harm our efforts to contain the COVID-19 virus.

This matter has been turned over to the Commissioner of Police for further investigation.

I wish to once again plead with individuals to refrain from putting out and

spreading such false and potentially harmful information.

Let me be very blunt.

Some people have very hard heads.

Well, this virus is harder and badder than even the hardest of heads in this country.

But together, the Bahamian people are stronger and more resilient than this virus – but only if we work together.

My number one priority, each of our priorities, must be to save lives and to protect our health and the health of our loved ones, neighbors and fellow Bahamians and residents.

I want this curfew to end as soon as possible.

I want these restrictions over as soon as possible.

But for now we have to stop the spread of this virus.

To help stop the spread of COVID-19, the Royal Bahamas Police Force will increase efforts to enforce the curfew regulations.

There are still too many people on the road.

Individuals age 75 and older are asked not to leave their homes.

Those between the ages of 65 and 74 should work from home.

The purpose is not to isolate our senior citizens by asking them to stay at home.

The purpose is to save lives.

Family members should stay in regular contact with older relatives.

Please make sure they have their regular medications, groceries and supplies so they don't have to leave their homes.

Each household should have one designated shopper.

Grocery stores with the capability will be encouraged to activate online shopping platforms to reduce the number of people having to come into their stores for food and supplies and the length of time customers have to spend in the store.

The Government will introduce a food shopping schedule.

Shopping days and times will be designated based on the first letter of a person's last name.

More details will be released this week.

This measure is intended to reduce the number of people on the road and to reduce the number of people at grocery stores at any one time.

This is to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Again, let me stress, our food stocks are healthy and there is no need for panic buying.

We are still receiving international cargo and there is no shortage of food or fuel. There is enough for everyone.

We also have adequate supplies of fuel and propane.

We are seeing more litter on the road, which could pose other health challenges.

Please dispose of garbage properly and in a sanitary manner.

Let us use this time as an opportunity to practice better environmental practices.

I wish to remind you of a number of current and additional measures.

Pharmacies will be allowed to operate from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Banks will be allowed to operate from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Landscaping and property maintenance businesses and janitorial service businesses will be allowed to operate on Saturday and Sunday only.

Pool maintenance businesses will be allowed to operate on Friday and Saturday only.

All street or roadside vendors will be prohibited from operating.

This does not include newspaper vendors who should remain at one location.

To ensure that the reconstruction efforts on Grand Bahama and Abaco and Ragged Island do not come to a halt, construction companies working on rebuilding projects

on those islands have been exempted from the Emergency Orders.

Hardware stores to service those construction companies have also been exempted.

I wish to advise that all public parks will be closed beginning at 9 a.m. on Tuesday, 31st of March.

As previously announced, exercise will only be permitted within the confines of your property or your immediate neighborhood.

Driving to any exercise site or facility is prohibited.

Fellow Bahamians:

The number of infections continues to rise, though we still do not fully know the rate of infection, which we continue to analyze and to assess.

What we do know is that a rise in infections means there is community spread.

Community spread is a medical term.

To put it in everyday language this means that the virus is going around.

If you do not listen to the public health advice, you could catch the virus.

It could make you sick and you could die.

You could spread it to you friends and family and neighbors and others.

It could make them sick.

They could die.

More than 30,000 people have died worldwide from this virus.

Let me tell you what has happened to many of the dead in some countries.

They have been taken into hospital isolation wards for treatment.

This means no friends or family members were able to see them because of how contagious COVID-19 is.

They endured treatment alone.

They got sicker alone.

Many died alone with no friends or relatives at their sides.

You do not want this to be your fate or the fate of anyone you know or any Bahamian or resident.

To avoid this from happening, I again plead with you to follow public health advice and the regulations in the emergency orders.

In as much as it is possible, stay at home!

I repeat, stay at home!

When you stay at home you limit your exposure to people who have this virus in The Bahamas.

We do not want a surge of sick people at our hospitals.

What we have seen from country after country is that when this happens hospital systems are quickly overwhelmed.

Hospitals are not able to treat those who need help.

Many people die as a result.

I told you last week about a country in Europe where there were approximately 800 deaths in one day.

That same country has now seen approximately 900 deaths in a single day.

Many rich and powerful countries cannot handle the large number of critically ill patients.

It is important you hear and heed the message of health officials who are trying to save your life and protect your health.

Do not be the foolish person who is up and down around town who only realizes this is a crisis when you are waiting on medical help and you cannot breathe.

Listen to the advice our public health officers have given from the beginning of this crisis.

Encourage your friends and family to stay at home as well.

As a medical doctor I can tell you that patients who listen do better.

Those who do not have worse outcomes and put their lives at risk.

For us to overcome as a country we must work as one united citizen army in this fight.

We are now a citizen army, fighting this threat together.

Many on the frontlines in our citizen army are our dedicated medical professionals who are putting themselves at risk on our behalf.

As a sign of gratitude, I ask you to be a part of this citizen army by doing all you can to limit the spread of this infection.

You can play your important part by firstly following advice and the temporary emergency regulations.

I then need you to ensure your family does the same.

By extension I need you to urge your friends and neighbors to do the same.

Your mental health is also important.

I know the emergency measures are difficult.

They were put in place to save lives.

They will only last as long as is necessary.

Someone sent me these words of encouragement that I want to pass on to you:

“Fear is a disease. Hope is its only cure.”

So in these difficult days, which will last for some time, do not be overcome by fear.

Many are understandably worried and anxious.

But try to turn those emotions into something positive.

It is important to watch and to read reliable and credible news.

It is important to watch the briefings we give.

But do not spend your day bogged down consuming news that will make you depressed and scared.

It is important to exercise, following the regulations on where you can go.

It is important to go outside to catch some sun.

It is important to do fun activities inside and outside with your family.

It is important to call relatives and friends, to text them, or to have video chats.

Read together as a family.

Pray together as a family.

Have family discussions.

This is a time to make up for lost opportunities.

Hard times can be periods we use to reset our lives.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

The COVID-19 pandemic is wreaking havoc on the global economy.

Every country is struggling to implement plans and programs to lessen the impact, especially on the most vulnerable.

I told you recently that we are fighting on two fronts.

We are fighting a health battle and an economic and financial battle.

We must and we will win both battles.

This week I will make an announcement for those who live in rental properties of a certain value who have lost jobs or income because of COVID-19.

Saving lives and protecting the health and safety of our citizens and residents is our priority.

We must also meet the minimal needs of our economy.

Accordingly, we decided to add a number of businesses to the Emergency Order's exemption list.

However, these businesses may only operate under certain restrictions and must enforce physical distancing of 3-6ft at all times.

We must find new ways of stimulating economic growth.

Even in the most challenging times there exist opportunities.

For example, the demand for delivery services will increase the need for more delivery service companies.

The approvals process for investment projects, both domestic and international, will be accelerated to ensure we get people back to work as quickly as possible.

The Minister of Finance recently announced in the House of Assembly a number of measures designed to cushion the negative impact of COVID 19 and to stabilize our economy.

Foreign investment contributes significantly to our economic development.

We previously announced the approval of several major investment projects on New Providence, Grand Bahama, Abaco and Eleuthera.

My Office remains engaged with those investors and we are confident that we are in a most favorable position.

We are taking steps to minimize any impediment to the implementation of these major projects.

In addition, there are a number of other investment domestic and international

proposals before the government for consideration.

We have already begun the process of expediting these proposals.

I have directed the Bahamas Investment Authority, in consultation with all relevant stakeholders, to move aggressively to remove or minimize obstacles and to facilitate the implementation of these projects.

We continue to approve incentives under the Hotels Encouragement Act for a

number of small- and medium-size business which will assist them in their recovery.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Last week, I visited the Emergency Operation Centre at the Ministry of Health to say a special thank you to health care professionals coordinating the response to COVID-19.

This week I will hold a conference call with Family Island Administrators to get an update on the preparation in Family Islands.

I want to thank the healthcare workers and providers and the law enforcement officers who are on the frontline of this COVID-19 fight.

They are doing extraordinary work in these very challenging times.

I want to thank all of the public servants for continuing to work at their stations and those who continue to work from home.

Despite the challenging times that we are in, the work of government must go on.

On behalf of the Government and people of The Bahamas I thank the many workers who provide essential services to the public.

Too often, we forget the people who help to keep our country together and running.

It is during emergencies that we remember the critical work of: grocery store clerks, cashiers, packing boys and girls, store managers, security personnel, sanitation workers, gas attendants, pharmacists, food service workers, packers, delivery drivers, maintenance and cleaning workers, and the workers in non-profit agencies.

These workers who continue to care for
and to provide for all of us.

Without them we could not get through
this difficult time.

They are a major part of our citizen
army.

I want to personally thank them.

All legitimate work has dignity because
of the dignity of the human being doing the
work.

Let us respect their skills and
dedication.

They too are on the frontline.

Please give them your thanks.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

A critical part of our response to the COVID-19 threat is being led by Dr. Merceline Dahl-Regis, an internationally renowned public health professional and former Chief Medical Officer.

Dr. Merceline Dahl-Regis is the Coordinator of the COVID-19 response and a special adviser to the Prime Minister.

On May 2, 2018 at Government House, I had the privilege of thanking Dr. Dahl-Regis as she was receiving the Public Health Hero of the Americas Award from the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).

“She was the second Caribbean national and the first Caribbean woman to receive the prestigious award.”

I told her at the time:

“I thank you on behalf of the Government and people of The

Commonwealth of The Bahamas for the many years that you have given in service to The Bahamas and to the world ...

“Your work has helped to save lives. Your country owes you a tremendous gratitude. Generations to come will benefit from your vision and dedication.”

Merceline: I wish to repeat what I said then.

Thank you for helping to lead this fight today. You are a Bahamian hero.

The country is fortunate to have you on the frontline.

Fellow Bahamian and Residents:

Just a few days ago the Roman Catholic community lost Sr. Cecilia Albury, O.S.B, a Benedictine nun of many years. May she rest in peace.

I wish to offer condolences to the Benedictine Sisters of St. Martin's Monastery on Nassau Street, to Sister

Celia's family and friends and to the Roman Catholic community in The Bahamas.

Sr. Cecilia hailed from Harbour Island.

She was the daughter of Mrs. Remila Albury, who was the organist at St. Thomas More Parish for many years.

Sister Cecilia was a beautiful spirit. She was quiet, humble and unassuming.

Her life vocation was as a primary school teacher in the Catholic School system.

She was also involved with music ministry at Sacred Heart Parish.

When she left teaching she served as the coordinator of the elder care ministry at St. Joseph's Church, where she helped to care for many seniors during the day.

Sister Cecilia and the nuns of St. Martin, and so many other people in religious life, lived lives of sacrifice and service.

Their ministry of faith, hope and love was dedicated to our people in ministries

ranging from teaching to caring for the sick, the poor and the vulnerable.

They poured and gave their lifeblood to our Bahamas.

Their witness and testimony serve as an example to us all during this time.

We are all called to service as a part of the common good

Each of us have a role and a ministry we can offer during these difficult days, including the ministries of encouragement and support.

Just as there are health care warriors are on the frontlines, we need prayer warriors – not only to combat this disease – but to work against fear and panic

In Galatians 5:22-23 we are reminded of the Fruits of the Spirit.

These Fruits of the Spirit are: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Let us share these fruits with one another as people of faith and as citizens of One Bahamas.

Let us continue to encourage each other
and to pray for one another.

Thank and God bless our Bahamas.
