



PRESS CONFERENCE REMARKS

Update on COVID-19 Response

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

Sunday, 19 April 2020

Office of the Prime Minister

**Cecil Wallace Building
West Bay Street**

Nassau, Bahamas

3:00 P.M.

Good afternoon.

I want to provide the country and the media an update on our comprehensive and full government response to the health, social and economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 virus.

This is also a follow-up to a number of matters from my National Address last Monday.

I am joined at this afternoon's press conference by the Commissioner of Police,

Paul Rolle; the Acting Financial Secretary, Marlon Johnson, my Special Advisor on COVID-19, Dr. Merceline Dahl-Regis, and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Pearl McMillian.

As Dr. Dahl-Regis indicated this past Thursday, the data shows that the measures that we have implemented are working.

We are not seeing the numbers that we originally projected.

But this means that we must continue the measures that are working.

If we become complacent and too relaxed the number of those infected can go up considerably.

Physicians always tell patients to take their full course of medication.

We have to continue to follow the advice of health professionals.

We are trying to balance these essential and necessary health measures with what can be done to carefully reopen some areas of the economy.

Our main priority at all times must be to save and to protect lives.

This is an ongoing process that will take time.

We will have to make adjustments as we proceed.

We are carefully monitoring what other countries and jurisdictions are doing.

We continue to be open to your suggestions and ideas.

The Suggestions and Questions Section at opm.gov.bs is now up and running.

A number of suggestions have already been received.

To date, there are 60 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in The Bahamas. Fifty-one in New Providence, 7 in Grand Bahama, 1 in Bimini and 1 in Cat Cay.

This includes 2 confirmed cases confirmed earlier today.

The Ministry of Health will provide more detailed information in its regular updates.

Starting early this week, health officials will expand sampling using current RT-PCR capacity.

This is being done utilizing physicians, nurses and medical technologists to go out into the community.

- Those targeted for testing include:
- Contacts of confirmed cases, especially those with symptoms;
- Healthcare personnel nearing the end of their quarantine period;

- Nursing and Homecare personnel;
and
- Individuals calling into the hotline reporting concerning symptoms.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to remind all Bahamians and residents that the 24-hour curfew will go back into effect tomorrow, Monday the 20th of April at 5am until Friday the 24th of April at 9pm.

On Friday at 9pm, the weekend Lockdown will again take effect.

The 24-hour curfew is not a time to go out to socialize or to go visiting friends.

It is not a time for a joyride.

The Royal Bahamas Police Force under the leadership of Paul Rolle will continue to enforce the curfew.

Unless you are exempted under the Emergency Powers Order, you may only leave your home for essential purposes, such as purchasing groceries, food, gas,

pharmaceuticals and other essential items,
or in the event of an emergency.

I know you have heard this over and over, but if you must go out, you **must** practice physical distancing of at least 6ft.

You **must** wear a protective face mask at all times.

Please wash your hands often and thoroughly, for at least 20 seconds or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

Employers must provide their employees who are serving the general public with masks and appropriate protective equipment and measures.

If not, the employer could face a fine.

Let me repeat: Employers will face fines if their employees serving the public are not wearing a mask.

Store owners may also be fined for allowing customers to enter their establishments without a protective face covering.

If you do not have a mask, use a scarf, a T-shirt, or cotton cloth that covers the nose and mouth.

I was alarmed by the number of people out on the road during the 24-hour curfew this past week.

In some areas it was hard to tell that the country was under a curfew at all.

The longer it takes to stop the spread of COVID-19, the longer it will take to end the curfews and lockdowns and fully re-open our economy.

The decision as to when to reopen parts of the economy and to get people back to work, rests in all of our hands.

Our collective action will help to determine a number of timelines.

This is not the time to go for a drive or an unnecessary trip to the grocery store.

This is the time to stay at home.

The Emergency Powers Order will be strictly enforced by the police.

This includes the curfew and lockdown measures, and operating hours of exempted businesses.

To help identify essential workers, every Bahamian and resident will be required to carry valid government-issued ID when in public.

This may include: a passport, NIB card, driver's license or voter's card.

Employers of essential workers should register employees with the Royal Bahamas Police Force at 311.

If you are found in violation of the Order you will be fined.

Let me repeat this: If you are found in violation of the Order you will be fined.

Those who are out just riding about with no reason should expect even greater enforcement.

Let me also say to those who believe that they can use this emergency for criminal purposes, that there is enhanced surveillance by officers and through the use of various technologies.

We will not tolerate gang activity or those who believe that they can drive around in groups to target others.

The Police Force is on high alert.

The Royal Bahamas Police Force notes as one of their crime tips that members of the public who see suspicious activity should take a picture of suspect vehicles and individuals and report such information to the Force.

That information will be strictly confidential.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I wish to announce that the Government has decided to continue the shopping schedule implemented last week.

The general public may food shop from Monday to Friday from 6am to 7pm.

The first two hours are reserved for senior citizens and persons with disabilities.

Seniors and persons with disabilities may of course shop at any time during these hours.

Saturdays, from 6am to 6pm are reserved for essential workers.

However, essential workers may also shop during the regular shopping hours Monday to Friday.

The Farmer's Market on Gladstone Road will be allowed to operate on Saturdays from 7am to 5pm, for essential workers only.

Yesterday, I went to the food store with my mask on. A security guard asked for my ID.

I applaud him and all the other security personnel and workers who are doing their jobs under difficult circumstances.

Thankfully, he allowed me in after he decided that I was an essential worker.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

As I forecast last Monday, a Food Security Committee and Coordinator have been asked to serve.

Once the Cabinet has reviewed the recommendations of the members, the

Committee and Coordinator will be announced this week.

I met with members of the proposed Committee last week to discuss what we need to do to make sure that Bahamians and residents throughout the country have adequate and healthy food.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The Ministry of Finance has been coordinating with the National Insurance Board (NIB), the Small Business

Development Centre (SBDC), and the Department of Inland Revenue (DIR) to make sure money is getting into the hands of thousands of Bahamians in need.

Unemployed workers and closed businesses can benefit from the assistance that the economic stimulus measures have set in motion.

NIB has two programs from which affected individuals can receive financial assistance:

The first is their standard unemployment benefit for workers who contribute to the insurance scheme.

The second is a Government-sponsored unemployment assistance program for self-employed individuals, a category of persons who are not normally able to receive unemployment assistance from NIB.

As of Friday, April 17:

NIB processed over 14,600 unemployment claims;

NIB has paid out approximately \$7 million in Unemployment Benefits, so far in April, 2020;

NIB is currently working on an additional 5,000 applications.

This, however, does not include everyone, yet.

Payments are still being processed for many additional workers across different employment categories.

I can assure you that NIB is using innovative approaches, including working

with employers to help to speed up the process.

Last week, NIB had to appeal to some employers – both large and small – to comply with document requests, as this is causing some delay in payments to eligible workers.

However, to date, NIB has received a positive response from companies, which is helping to move many more payments along.

It is important to point out that not everyone is eligible for NIB benefit payments.

NIB is an insurance scheme and the normal rules associated with benefit payments apply.

In light of this, NIB is also administering the Government's Special Unemployment Assistance Program for Self-Employed Workers.

This is giving thousands of Bahamians, who ordinarily are not able to claim

benefits, paycheck support for an eight-week period.

As of Friday, April 17:

NIB processed 5,592 self-employed applications;

3,400 have been approved;

NIB has paid out \$1.96 million so far.

Taken together, in just a few weeks, NIB has processed and approved more than 18,000 applications and paid out just under \$9 million dollars.

I must commend NIB for how quickly they were able to shift operations online and for their use of cashless forms of payments.

This means Bahamians do not need to stand in lines to get money.

They also do not need a bank account.

Even if you do not have a bank account, you can receive money on your cell phone from NIB through its digital partner and use your cell phone to either redeem cash or spend the digital vouchers at grocery

stores and other businesses to pay for items.

NIB is partnering with innovative Bahamian technology companies that are making mobile wallets available to Bahamians.

The Ministry of Finance has also allocated some \$25 million to help small businesses with payroll support.

The Small Business Development Center is the vehicle through which this assistance is being provided.

As of Friday, April 17:

1. 111 companies were approved for financing. That represents \$7.4 million;
2. So far, 601 businesses have completed applications.
3. These businesses represent over 3,500 full-time and part-time employees.

The Government is also contributing some \$30 million in direct grants to allow payment of salaries of up to 5,000 employees over the three-month period.

This is being provided for under a Tax Credit and Deferral Programme that is currently underway.

Taken together, the Tax Credits – or grants – and the Tax Deferrals are providing \$60 million in funding to medium- and large Bahamian businesses.

The Department of Inland Revenue is administering this program and is currently accepting online applications from eligible businesses.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have convened an Economic Recovery Committee. The Committee will advise the Government on the safe and gradual re-opening of the economy in the immediate term.

They will also propose a medium- to long-term strategy to restore the economy of The Bahamas.

The Chairs and Members of the Committee will be announced this week after the Cabinet reviews the recommendations.

Committee members will represent a range of sectors. They will consult widely within the private sector for ideas, projects and programs.

We will have to think boldly and creatively to boost jobs and economic activity, especially in terms of domestic production, tourism, construction, and local and foreign investment.

During a meeting with the proposed members of the economic advisory group we discussed a number of issues: e-commerce, diversifying the economy, accelerating Foreign Direct Investment projects, restoring the macro economy and tourism.

The Bahamas entered the COVID-19 pandemic with adequate foreign reserves to cover essential imports, and to preserve the parity of the Bahamian dollar against the U.S. currency.

The Central Bank is working closely with the Ministry of Finance to ensure that fiscal stabilization policies are balanced with adequate additional access to foreign currency, through the borrowings which the Government must undertake.

Such stabilization policies uphold domestic spending on essential needs, some of which must be satisfied through imports.

Alongside the financing that can be obtained locally, the Government will have to rely on some foreign currency borrowing to cover its revenue shortfall.

Taking this active financing strategy into account, along with other foreign exchange market strategies that the

Central Bank is pursuing, it is expected that the drawdown in the foreign reserves will reach about \$1 billion in 2020.

This, from a present healthy level of approximately \$2 billion.

The Central Bank expects that after 2020, net inflows of foreign currency through the private sector will begin to improve.

This will permit a very gradual recovery in external reserves, provided the deficit financing strategy maintains a prudent

balance between Bahamian dollar and foreign currency borrowing.

As our tourism sector may not be fully restored for some time, the economy will also have to aggressively attract other sources of foreign exchange.

Priority will be given to expedited processing of foreign investment proposals that could generate such inflows, and stimulate construction activity.

We will consider a streamlined approach for reviewing lower value applications that now go to the National Economic Council for approval.

With fuel costs being the largest single item in the import bill, a focus must be sustained on ensuring that BPL can lock in significant savings from the current external environment of low oil prices.

In the near-term the Government will encourage, where possible import substitution through local production.

This may include for example but not be limited to items like hand sanitizer, disinfectants, non-medical grade face masks and related health care products.

We will promote fast growing agricultural produce and an increase in fisheries for local consumption.

Let me now advise you of a number of immediate measures.

As part of the gradual and safe re-opening of the economy, and based on the advice of health experts, construction on the Family Islands, will be allowed to resume. I want to remind construction workers that face masks are mandatory.

Also on Family Islands, hardware, lumber, plumbing and electrical stores that cater to construction will be allowed to open Monday to Friday 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Let me restate that Family Island borders remain closed to international and to domestic air and marine transport from other islands.

In New Providence, the following businesses will be allowed to operate, effective tomorrow, Monday 20 April.

- Auto parts stores will be allowed to operate on Tuesdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- Hardware and home stores will be allowed to operate on Wednesdays and Fridays from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

- Plant nurseries will be allowed to operate on Mondays and Thursdays 6am to 12 Noon.

Landscaping and property maintenance will now fall under essential businesses and will be allowed to operate during the 24-hour curfew, Monday to Friday from 9am – 5pm.

As with other businesses, physical distancing must be adhered to at all times and individuals must wear a mask while out in public.

The owners of these businesses must abide by the strict guidelines in the Emergency Orders.

We also want to encourage exempted businesses who have not already done so to request permission from the Competent Authority to begin delivery services.

I want to make a very strong plea to business owners who are in a strong financial position to do so, to hold off from

laying off employees for as long as possible.

Such generosity of spirit will make a tremendous difference at this time.

In the past few weeks I have been pleased to see an increase in delivery operations and the employment opportunities that they are creating.

I encourage Bahamians to seize this opportunity to start a delivery business of their own.

Our plan is to gradually begin to re-open the economy based on the data collected by health officials and their professional advice.

But the pace of the re-opening of the economy will also depend on the cooperation and discipline of the public in following the health guidelines.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I want to thank all the Bahamians and residents who have listened to the public

health advice and followed the Emergency Orders.

By staying home as much as possible, by remaining physically distant from others, you saved lives.

You lessened the spread of this virus.

Keep doing what you are doing.

This virus has killed more than one hundred and fifty thousand people around the world.

Everyone in our Commonwealth should take it seriously.

However, we still have a group who will not listen.

Each time we allow an opening to assist people with returning to some semblance of normalcy, some take advantage of this.

We do not want our health system overwhelmed with sick and dying people.

If you are careless or reckless about your own life, consider the lives of the people you love.

Let's stay home as much as possible.

We can beat this faster if we all listen and comply with the rules.

And the faster we beat this, the quicker we can return to a more normal life.

There is a quote from the late Steve Jobs which I want to share.

Just before he died, Jobs said: “There is a big difference between a human being and being human.”

We are all human beings, but we must all work at being human and humane.

To be human we must care about others.

To be human is to be kind, to be generous, to be considerate of each other, especially in times such as these.

Let us all be more humane and human by helping to protect each other.

I wish to end on a personal note.

I want to thank the many, many Bahamians who offered me birthday greetings last week.

Thank you so much.

Your prayers and your best wishes sustain me every hour of every day.

Thank you and good evening.

May God continue to bless our
Bahamas.

We are happy to answer your
questions.
