



National Address

Most Hon. Dr. Hubert Minnis

Prime Minister

Sunday, 4 October 2020

5 p.m.

Nassau, The Bahamas

Good afternoon,

Today, I want to provide the nation with an update on our ongoing and comprehensive efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic in the Bahamas.

When I last addressed the House of Assembly, I noted that: “We live in an emergency due to the pandemic.” This emergency continues. It will be with us for some time.

The nature of this virus means that developments on the ground may change very quickly.

Because of this, we must be prepared to respond aggressively and quickly as events warrant, as we have done from the very beginning of this pandemic.

The balancing of the health, economic and social needs of the country is sometimes an hourly, daily and weekly effort.

As you have seen from the international news, most countries throughout the world are seeing a tremendous increase in infections in various parts of their nations, requiring different strategies for various regions.

In the Northern Hemisphere, governments have warned of increased cases as they move into cooler months and as more people must remain indoors.

Some countries have gone back to targeted lockdowns or more restrictive curfews and other measures needed to address the high number of infections, hospitalizations and, sadly, deaths.

Lockdowns are hard on family life; they're hard on businesses and individual's finances; they're hard on people's mental health.

When virus cases increase, governments first try to utilize other restrictive measures.

But, if cases rise exponentially and virus spread is out of control, governments often have no choice but to order a lockdown to save lives.

This has become an international standard and response by most governments around the world, including countries that have generally had a good response to the pandemic.

Indeed, the targeted and sustained lockdowns in Bimini and most recently, Grand Bahama, were essential in reducing the number of infections on those islands, both of which continue to have low numbers at this time.

As most of the world has sought to reopen in order to restore a level of economic viability, there has been an increase in cases, sometimes as a result of a level of complacency in not following health guidelines.

The world is tired of this pandemic. I know that you are sick and tired of COVID-19.

It continues to harm and to frustrate our lives. It has kept us away from loved ones and our routines.

COVID-19 is exhausting our patience and continues to cause massive and unprecedented disruption.

Global and national economies are still in a dire state.

But despite all of this, the virus is nowhere near exhausted.

It is as aggressive, it is as powerful, and it is as deadly as ever. Because of this we must be as vigilant as ever. We have no choice, because our lives and livelihoods are at stake. We all remain vulnerable.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

I wish to note some areas of progress, as well as areas of great concern.

We are encouraged by the progress on Grand Bahama and the majority of Family Islands, but the restrictive measures currently in place are not achieving the desired results for New Providence and Abaco.

One in every 100 residents of New Providence is now infected with COVID-19.

It is clear that some of us are not taking this global pandemic seriously. Reports and videos of large Junkanoo rush-outs, socializing and large gatherings show that many have let their guards down.

This has to stop if we are going to return to some sense of normalcy with any consistency.

Sadly, we are now averaging one death per day and our medical facilities have now reached capacity.

I again offer condolences to the families and friends of those who have died. They remain in our hearts and our prayers, as do those who are at home or in hospital recovering from COVID-19.

Let me repeat what the Minister of Health, the Hon. Renward Wells stated at his press conference last week.

“Sadly, COVID-19 has been confirmed to have claimed the lives of 96 people and 15 deaths are still under investigation. Consequently, we have a mortality rate of 2.27%.

“While The Bahamas has experienced a higher number of deaths in this second wave, the case fatality ratio, which estimates the proportion of deaths among identified cases fits into the range of the global case fatality rate by country which stands between 1.0% and 25%.”

As of Saturday the 3rd of October, there were 96 confirmed deaths related to COVID-19.

Because the number of cases on the majority of our Family Islands and Grand Bahama have been low over the past few weeks, this has allowed for more opening up so these residents could get back to a greater level of normalcy.

The major problem we face is on New Providence, our most populated island, where cases remain at an elevated level.

The elevated New Providence numbers mirror the current challenge countries face worldwide managing the virus.

Yesterday, I met with the Pan-American Health Organization and World Health Organization representative to the Bahamas, Dr. Esther de Gourville, and the Government's Health Consultant Dr. Merceline Dahl-Regis.

We discussed the current status of COVID-19 in The Bahamas, particularly New Providence, and possible strategies for the way forward.

Over the next two businesses days, Dr. de Gourville will meet with executive members of the Bahamas Chamber of Commerce and Employers' Confederation, members of the National COVID-19 Coordinating Committee, and other key stakeholders to discuss specific strategies and the way forward.

Dr. de Gourville will also meet with the Cabinet on Tuesday coming. The Leader of the Opposition and his team have been invited to attend this special meeting.

After these various meetings, I will brief the nation on the recommendations of our health experts, especially on the way forward for New Providence and Abaco.

During the meeting with Dr. de Gourville and Dr. Dahl-Regis, it was stressed that success in addressing community spread depends on

the public's behavior and adherence to COVID-19 preventative measures.

We also know, as was noted by the Minister of Health at his press conference this past Friday, that the workplace is a hot spot for COVID-19.

I once again ask employers and employees to rigorously follow and to adhere to the workplace guidelines agreed by health officials, the Bahamas Chamber of Commerce and Employers' Confederation and other entities.

With the numbers remaining high in New Providence it is important for us to recommit to following the COVID-19 guidelines fully.

We must recommit on New Providence to full compliance with the rules because the current elevated number of cases is straining our hospital and health care systems.

Remember, as a people, we have a poor health profile. We have serious problems with obesity, hypertension and diabetes. People who have these conditions do poorly when infected with the virus.

The more physically distant we are, the more we wear our masks properly, the fewer people will be infected.

This would help to give our hospital staff more time and resources to treat the people already in wards without having to manage additional patients.

A simple message we gave earlier in the pandemic is as relevant today as it was when we first gave it: If you don't have to be out, stay at home.

When you are out be physically distant and wear your masks properly. That means the mask should stay over your nose and mouth at all times.

A person of any age could have this virus. You must not let your guards down because of how close people are to you.

If you have reason to visit relatives or close friends, you must still follow the guidelines.

Our data show that infection in the home is a main point of virus transmission.

So when you go to see relatives, keep your mask on and they should wear one too. If possible during your visit sit outside at a distance. If inside, open the windows, keep your masks on and keep distance between yourselves.

Knowing someone or being emotionally close to them will not keep you safe from the virus.

Our best and most effective measure to control the spread of COVID-19 is our individual and collective behaviour and responsibility.

National unity and the spirit of “we” are essential in combatting COVID-19.

But when we do not act together, this deadly virus sees an opportunity to exploit us and do damage to our individual and common good.

When you fail to wear a mask or abide by other health measures, the virus may seize on this opportunity to harm you and through you, do harm to others.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

In an effort:

- (a) to standardize COVID 19 RT PCR testing in The Bahamas;
- (b) to reduce the time that data from testing is provided to the Ministry of Health's Surveillance and Contact Tracing Units;
- (c) to decrease the risk of community spread due to delayed contact tracing and

(d) ultimately to minimize the spread of COVID 19 within the country, the following processes will be implemented:

(1) All laboratories providing COVID-19 tests will be required to be registered with the Ministry of Health.

(2) Each laboratory will be required to meet testing standards established by the Ministry of Health.

(3) Laboratories will also be subject to periodic cross-referencing to ensure quality control.

(4) Laboratories will be prohibited from administering the COVID 19 RT PCR test unless the patient provides all identifying particulars required by the Case Identification Form.

(5) Laboratories will now be required to turn around test results within a maximum of forty-eight hours.

(6) Going forward, the Ministry of Health and the laboratories will utilize various technology to ensure the timely receipt of testing data by the Ministry of Health's Surveillance Team and Contact Tracing Unit.

I have met with representatives of testing laboratories to discuss these objectives and the planned action steps to achieve these objectives.

The laboratories reaffirmed their commitment to collaborate with the Government on our strategy and plans to fight COVID-19.

Let me also remind you: Our testing and contact-tracing regimes are key to our strategy to combat the virus.

I would like to thank the staff at our National Reference Laboratory, which has led the way in our country for testing since the beginning of the pandemic.

Lab team members increased our capacity and weathered difficult times during case surges.

Their work has been instrumental in giving us the data we need to understand the crisis and to make policy.

They seek out and identify possible cases to quarantine such individuals, lessening further infection.

Our contact tracers have saved lives. We owe them our gratitude.

On behalf of the entire Bahamas, I thank them for dedication and tireless efforts.

They are an example of the spirit of “we”!

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

As we collectively continue the fight against COVID 19, the Government also continues its efforts to help to support the most vulnerable in our society.

As announced earlier this week by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, the Government has made available an additional \$45 million for these purposes.

In particular, Government-funded unemployment benefits will continue through December.

Additionally, \$10 million dollars have been allocated for a second phase of the national food programme to the end of December 2020. This is a government sponsored program to ensure that Bahamians receive food assistance in a timely and responsible manner.

The food programme is administered by the National Food Distribution Task Force, a collaboration of the Ministry of Social Services and Non-Governmental Organizations.

It was very encouraging to read a testimonial of someone who has received assistance from the Food Task Force.

Part of it read:

“....For the first time in 40 years I was without work and an income. It became a reality... when I found myself without food. I thank God for the food program. It has been a big help to me and my family.”

There are many in our society who are truly in need. I read that testimonial to ask people who are not truly in need, and who have begun to receive income into their homes, to not take the food or vouchers from the programme.

Please allow the limited resources of the Government and the generous private donors to go further to meet the needs of those who need it during this time.

For those of you who can, I encourage you to continue to look around your communities and lend a hand to those in need.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Even as we continue to care for our neighbours, I am pleased to inform you that the government's Economic Recovery Committee (ERC) has completed their substantive research and consultative work.

This past Tuesday, the Committee presented to Cabinet their Executive Summary Report that details some 163 recommendations on a range of subject areas to spur our economic recovery and our sustained economic health.

The ERC and its sub-committees consulted with 60 companies and organizations and had the benefit of 300 submissions sent to it from Bahamians across the entire country.

I wish to say thank you to the members of the ERC and its subcommittees – and to all contributors – for providing the government with dozens of insightful, thoughtful and progressive ideas to move our Bahamas forward.

The Committee certainly took to heart my admonishment to be bold and innovative.

Their recommendations reflect well-considered and well-researched concepts that will guide discussions of policy development in the country for many years to come.

Some of the areas covered in the report of the ERC include:

-Ideas around the establishment of independently managed national funds that can better mobilize private and public sector

resources to fuel the rapid, inclusive and sustained development of all islands of The Bahamas;

-A call for a targeted and focused increase in the contribution of agriculture and fisheries as a share of the country's economic output or GDP in order to move steadily toward greater food security;

-An increase in the resources available for Bahamian entrepreneurs and small businesses, including the establishment of a national digital marketplace and the creation of small business incubators;

-A full revamp of the country's investment regime so that investments projects and business expansion can happen more quickly and with less government bureaucracy;

-An acceleration of reforms in the energy sector to make solar and other renewable energy solutions more quickly deployed across The Bahamas.

The recommendations also offered ideas related to the economic revitalization of Grand Bahama and the Family Islands, a greater focus on the Orange or Creative Economy, as well as reforms related to education and labor, among many other areas.

The thinking that informed The Bahamas in its pre-COVID days will not be well suited for The Bahamas that emerges from the pandemic.

In many respects, the status-quo will need to be set aside.

This will require us all – including myself and my Cabinet colleagues – to understand that as a country we will have to do things differently.

These necessary changes, as they always do, will invite resistance as many would like to be able to stay in a comfortable space and era that simply will not exist after COVID-19.

The Cabinet is presently reviewing the full report, after which time I will speak to the nation on those recommendations that we will seek to make a priority for execution.

The report will at this time be made public. As I have said before, I did not establish this Committee just to write a nice report that will then sit on a shelf to collect dust. We are taking the recommendations seriously.

We must be prepared for the dawning of this new economic day by implementing the changes and by executing the plans that will lead to a Bahamian economy that is more resilient, dynamic, inclusive and sustainable.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

We remain committed to the re-opening and revitalization of our tourism sector, which in turn will begin to once again fuel our economy and provide critical employment opportunities across our islands.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on global tourism, and countries around the world face similar challenges in implementing necessary health and safety measures, while offering travellers the experience they would have had pre-COVID.

The Ministry of Tourism has been working tirelessly with officials from the Ministry of Health to devise a plan that will satisfy both travellers and tourism stakeholders, while protecting residents and visitors from the spread of the virus.

The new testing protocols announced on Thursday, which will allow for the discontinuation of a mandatory quarantine period beginning 1st November, have been carefully considered by both the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Health.

No protocol is perfect, and so we recognize that a balance must be found. The solution must work for everyone entering The Bahamas.

By introducing rapid antigen tests upon arrival, and then again 96 hours into a traveller's stay, we can more closely monitor and respond to any cases of the virus and act swiftly to contain its spread.

This means we can more confidently allow all visitors to move with less restriction through the destination.

With this approach we can offer visitors a bit more of the true Bahamas experience they know and love, albeit while wearing a mask in public places and abiding by physical distancing measures.

In addition, this allows for people who operate excursions and tours to also return to work and derive some benefit once again from this vital industry.

It also allows our Family Islands to reopen and function with some degree of normalcy.

We know our people in the tourism sector have suffered greatly over the past months and these decisions were also made with them in mind, knowing that they too have to return to work.

With that said, and with the introduction of the Antigen rapid tests, I am appealing to everyone working in the tourism sector, or who interacts with the public to continue to observe the basic rules. I can never say this enough.

This virus is no respecter of person, so please, wear your face mask, wash your hands regularly and keep your distance.

We are also encouraged by the collaboration with American Airlines, who will soon be implementing a pre-flight testing programme for passengers travelling to The Bahamas from Miami.

All passengers will receive a Rapid COVID-19 antigen test at the Miami airport, and will only be allowed to board the plane if their results are negative.

These passengers will then be able to more quickly begin their vacations from the moment they touch down on our shores.

I note that other airlines are offering similar programs in different destinations and I am sure that this will soon be another necessary and routine step to travel in the future as all airlines institute this requirement.

I know these last several months have not been easy, and the strain on our economy has been great.

We appreciate the perseverance of every Bahamian and the support and commitment of all tourism industry stakeholders.

That said, I have full confidence in the future of our tourism sector and know that brighter days are soon to come.

Only with the participation of every one of us can we get back to business and start seeing a rebound of our economy.

Tourism is the heart of our country and we must all do our part so that we can come back stronger and better than ever.

My Fellow Bahamians:

This pandemic is far from over. A better normal will not emerge for many, many months.

We must toughen our minds and harden our resolve for the long struggle ahead.

These are the most difficult times for The Bahamas since independence.

Focus on what you can do to keep yourself and your families healthy and safe. Focus on what you can do to save money and find opportunities even though there are few at this time.

Do not listen to those who sell fear and panic. Bahamians are a strong and resilient people. We are not bowed by challenges or tough times.

We beat back the first wave and we will beat back the second and must be prepared for more waves.

We have been hit time after time by devastating hurricanes and we cleaned up, rebuilt and thrived again.

Those who sell fear and discord are not genuine leaders. They do not have the fortitude to stand in difficult times.

Stay focused on what you could do to help yourselves and those you love. Listen to our public health team.

We will get through this together in time. But it will take time.

I will address the House of Assembly this coming Wednesday, the 7th of October.

Thank you for listening. And let me again thank the many Bahamians and residents who continue to follow the health measures.

May God bless our Bahamas and may God continue to guide and protect us.

Please stay safe. Good afternoon

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