



## **National Address**

**Most Hon. Dr. Hubert Minnis**

**Prime Minister**

**Sunday, 6 December 2020**

**5:00 P.M.**

Good afternoon.

Last week, we entered the season of Advent in preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Advent is a time of preparation. It is a time to ready ourselves for new life and new possibilities.

At Christmas, we find hope in the promise and light of Christ.

It has been a very trying and painful year for the world.

The worst pandemic in 100 years has killed more than 1 million people, wreaked havoc on the health of many more and caused the worst economic depression in our lifetime.

Hundreds of millions of people have lost their jobs and livelihoods, and fear what the future may bring.

Here at home, many Bahamians have fallen very ill. Some have died.

We continue to mourn those we have lost. May their memories be a blessing.

Let us continue to pray for the souls of the dead and for all who have lost loved ones.

This deadly virus and the subsequent and quick collapse of our tourism industry, and the decline in other areas of the economy, has hit Bahamians hard.

This includes many of those under 40 and our young people, who are anxious and worried about their future.

After nearly approximately three years of economic recovery, growth and an increase in jobs, our economy is in terrible shape because of COVID-19.

We have fallen on very tough and rough times.

The vast majority of our children and young people have not been able to go back to school for in-person learning.

Many Bahamians have required food and unemployment and social assistance.

Many businesspeople, including small business owners, are enduring the worst period they have ever experienced.

Yet, amidst the devastation and downturn we continue to endure, there is the promise of a new day and of economic recovery.

Just as we have entered Advent in preparation for Christmas, there is new hope and a dawning light.

Thanks to promising news on vaccines, the beginning of the end of the pandemic is near.

Developed countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States are on track to start vaccinations this month.

But, during this period before vaccines arrive here, we must work extra hard to keep our numbers down, so that we can continue to restart our economy and to welcome tourists.

Though we have many months to go, the light on the horizon is rising.

Next Advent and Christmas, God willing, we will be in a much better place.

But in the months ahead, we must remain vigilant and careful.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

From the outset of the pandemic, I reported to you that we had to aggressively respond on three fronts to this deadly virus and to this unprecedented period in most of our lifetimes.

We had to work to protect and to save lives.

We had to intervene to stabilize the economy as much as possible and to prepare for economic recovery.

And we had to respond aggressively to the social needs of our people.

This afternoon, I want to report to you on the health, economic and social progress we are making.

I also want to advise you of the way forward.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

The sacrifices we have made as a country have paid off.

When we look around the world, we can see how well we have done because we worked together.

So many countries are struggling, with some countries reporting a COVID-19 death every 30 seconds or so.

We pray that these countries have success with their public health measures, especially over the upcoming winter.

We should be rightfully proud and grateful that our Bahamas is doing well because of the work of our health professionals, our Police and Defence Force, and because of the discipline of all of you who abided by the health measures.

Just as we fought hard to get to this place by aggressively battling a difficult second wave, we must work just as hard to guard this success.

It is essential that we stay the course and continue to maintain our new case numbers as we await the vaccine.

We will only distribute vaccines if we believe that they are safe.

But we must keep in mind that a vaccine will only prevent further infections. It will not cure current infections.

Therefore, we must continue to work to control new infections, especially as it will take time to distribute a vaccine once it is available in The Bahamas.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

In order to celebrate Christmas and because we are doing generally well at the moment, I wish to advise you of the relaxation of a number of measures.

For the Christmas season, church and religious services may be held during curfew hours, that is, after 10 p.m. to accommodate midnight mass, watch-night services and other liturgical services.

This applies to New Providence, Abaco, Grand Bahama, Exuma and Eleuthera, as other islands do not currently have evening curfews.

This provision extends from the 24<sup>th</sup> of December 2020, up to and including January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021.

In the event that any of our churches require additional provisions to appropriately celebrate the birth of Christ during this sacred season, please make them known to the Competent Authority.

Consideration will be given to these requests, with appropriate consultation with our public health officials.

For the period of 24<sup>th</sup> December 2020 up to and including 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2021, social gatherings may take place with a maximum of 10 people.

This provision applies for the islands of New Providence, Abaco, Exuma and Eleuthera.

For Sunday, December 13<sup>th</sup> and Sunday, December 20<sup>th</sup>, retail operators will be able to provide services between the hours of 6 a.m. and 9 p.m.

This provision applies for the islands of New Providence and Abaco.

To be clear, the special provisions for the Christmas season that I have just outlined apply only to islands where the daily 5 a.m. to 10 p.m. curfew and certain other public health protection measures are still in place.

All other islands may continue as presently provided for in the Emergency Powers Order.

It is important that all residents on every island continue to practice the COVID-19 prevention guidelines.

Wear your mask. Practice physical distancing. Wash your hands thoroughly and often. Avoid large gatherings.

Effective tomorrow, Monday December 7, gyms in New Providence and Abaco may resume operations in accordance with Ministry of Health approved guidelines.

Also, effective tomorrow, Monday, December 7, the quarantine presently in place for travelers leaving New Providence to go to the Family Islands will be lifted.

Travelers from New Providence and Grand Bahama to the rest of The Bahamas will be required to obtain the travel visa, to

complete the daily health questionnaire and take the Rapid Antigen Test on the fifth day after their travel.

This is the same protocol in place for international travelers to The Bahamas.

Additionally, the requirement for people travelling from Exuma to the remainder of The Bahamas to take an RT PCR test will be removed.

The requirement for an RT PCR test for travelers from New Providence and Grand Bahama to the remainder of The Bahamas will remain in place.

Also, effective Monday December 7, 2020, Exuma and Eleuthera may resume in-person church services following the health guidelines of the Bahamas Christian Council and approved by the Ministry of Health.

My Fellow Bahamians:

COVID-19, continues to exact a heavy toll on our fiscal health and the economy as a whole.

All around the world we are seeing economies, large and small, experience heavy contractions and downturns.

In The Bahamas, we have the unfortunate distinction of having to manage the two unprecedented shocks of Hurricane Dorian and the global pandemic.

As such, it will take time for us to fully rebound and to return to pre-crisis levels.

In its most recent assessment, the International Monetary Fund projected a decline in Real GDP by about 16.2 percent for 2020, followed by a modest rebound of 2 percent in 2021.

According to recent estimates, it will not be until fiscal year 2022/2023 that the country's GDP levels are expected to get back to a pre-pandemic position.

However, the discipline and collective sacrifices we are seeing from the majority of Bahamians is translating into fewer COVID cases.

If we maintain this discipline and if we are able to avoid future major restrictions, it will bode well for an uplift in our economic conditions.

Indeed, we have seen that the modest reopening of the economy has already translated into improved revenues for the Treasury in the past month.

We have shown that containing the spread of the pandemic, lessens the need for the restrictive containment measures that negatively impact economic activity.

As we enter the holiday season, there is reason for growing optimism that the economic recovery is broadening.

The recent decision by major resorts, such as Atlantis, Baha Mar and the Hilton, to reopen their properties will start to restore

employment opportunities for the many Bahamians who have either been furloughed or laid off as a result of COVID-19.

In addition to restoring incomes and consumption, these reopenings will provide the Government with badly needed revenue.

Government finances are also under tremendous strain because of the unplanned unemployment, social and economic support provided by the Government to help those in need during this unprecedented time.

An improving financial positive outlook is shared by the international capital markets who just last week, demonstrated an extremely positive response to the prospects of a reopening Bahamas economy.

The recent bond offering was oversubscribed by hundreds of millions of dollars.

Because of the strong demand, we were able to secure a 125-basis points reduction in the yield since our last offer.

Yet, despite the promising developments, we remain in a very difficult place economically.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

I provided this context to assure you that your Government is clear about the fiscal and economic challenges we face and the responsibility that lies ahead.

The work of the Ministry, as set out in the “Resilient Bahamas” budget plan, is continuing without interruption.

Despite the fact that government revenues are down by as much as 50 percent, we are ensuring still that we do as much as possible to provide food and income replacement to assist those in need.

In short order, my Government will table the 2020 Fiscal Strategy Report, which will highlight our strategic priorities with respect to revenue collection, spending, and financing over the upcoming budget and the medium-term horizon.

This document is mandated by the Fiscal Responsibility Legislation, 2018.

As should be expected, it will be heavily influenced by the realities brought about by the uncertain domestic and global environment.

We started this fiscal year knowing it would be unlike any other we have experienced in many of our lifetimes.

It has challenged Ministry officials to stay nimble; to be flexible to adjust and adapt to the changing circumstances; and to be both responsive and responsible.

Although the reopening of the tourism economy will bring welcomed relief to many hospitality workers, families and the

country as a whole, we know there are still difficult times ahead and difficult decisions to make.

In presenting the Report to Parliament, we will highlight some of the immediate fiscal adjustments and accelerated reform efforts that are necessary and critical to remain on stable economic and financial footing over the near- and long-term.

My Fellow Bahamians:

The Ministry of Finance has had great success since my administration assumed stewardship over the country's finances.

In the past three years, this Government was able to reduce the deficit to historic lows for the first time in some ten years.

This was a clear demonstration that it is possible to put our fiscal house in order. I am proud of the work the Ministry has done.

I assure the Bahamian people, that this Administration will continue our prudent management of the country's finances.

The Ministry of Finance is staffed with technical experts and administrators, who work diligently every day to implement the fiscal and economic policies set by the Government, while managing the Ministry's core functions.

As we navigate these challenging times together, the welfare of the Bahamian people will continue to be our guiding star.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Our national success in addressing the health aspects of COVID-19, included a range of comprehensive measures and a dedicated and hardworking team of public health officials who offered their talents and many years of experience.

What we are doing to save lives and to protect health, we must also continue to do to boost livelihoods and to restore our economy and jobs.

To help guide our economic recovery, I will be guided by an economic team that will continue to consult widely with business, labour, religious leaders and civil society.

A core economic team will continue to meet regularly, just as public health officials have done during the pandemic.

The core work of this team and of my Administration during the remainder of this term is job-creation and economic recovery.

This includes structural reform, and bold ideas for diversification, the ease of doing business and the ongoing transformation toward a digital economy.

We are committed to the implementation of a number of the recommendations of the Economic Recovery Committee,

including rolling out a new and more nimble domestic and foreign investment process to get more money flowing into our economy.

The emphasis will be on projects which produce jobs and economic opportunity for all Bahamians.

We must also promote new thinking, ideas and structural reform to make our tourism sector even more innovative and vibrant.

We must utilize innovative public-private partnerships to get more Bahamians back to work.

We have already stated that we are boosting the amount of funds available to the Small Business Development Centre, including funds directed specifically for younger Bahamians and women.

To help advance these economic goals and to boost jobs, for the remainder of this term, I will continue to serve as the Minister of Finance.

The Hon. Desmond Bannister, the Minister of Works, will become Deputy Prime Minister.

Because of his portfolio, which includes capital works and infrastructure, and because of his experience and good counsel, he will be a part of the economic team.

A part of this team will be Senator, the Hon. Kwasi Thompson, who will be the Minister of State for Finance.

Over the past nearly four years he has been Minister of State for Grand Bahama and has promoted digital technology and training.

As Minister of State for Finance, I have asked him to focus on the economic needs and recovery of Grand Bahama, Family Island development and the ongoing digital transformation of The Bahamas and the Government.

I am also appointing a Special Advisor in the Office of the Prime Minister, who will help to drive the recommendations

made by the Economic Recovery Committee and to focus on the Ease of Doing Business.

This new Special Advisor is Mr. Nathaniel Beneby, Jr. Mr. Beneby was the first Bahamian to be appointed Managing Director, and Chairman of the Board of RBC Royal Bank (Bahamas) Ltd.

He has longstanding experience in banking and has served on a number of public and private boards. He has many decades of experience.

His core assignment is to help turn recommendations into action.

Also on this team will be the Financial Secretary Marlon Johnson and Mr. Kenneth Kerr, both of whom co-chaired the Economic Recovery Committee.

The public private collaboration they demonstrated as Co-chairs, reflects the Government's commitment to public-private

partnerships which will be vital in restoring our economic health and in creating jobs.

Another core member of this team will be Mrs. Wendy Craigg.

An economist by training, Mrs. Craig is a former and well-respected Governor of the Central Bank.

She has served as an economic advisor in the Ministry of Finance since May 2016. I will rely on her experience, advice and counsel.

My economic and financial team will meet regularly to help chart and guide our economic recovery.

We will augment this team as necessary with individuals and expertise from across the economy, including various members from the Economic Recovery Committee, such as:

- Mr. John Delaney, Chair of the Economic Advisory Committee;

- Ms. Christina Rolle, Executive Director of the Securities Commission, who worked in the private sector for more than 20 years and has extensive experience in the financial services sector;
- Mr. Patrick Ward, who has longstanding experience in business and the insurance industry; and
- noted businessman, Mr. Franklyn Butler.

Just as I assembled a team of wide expertise and talent to combat the health aspects of the pandemic, I will continue to do the same to get Bahamians back to work as quickly as possible.

This economy will recover.

More jobs are on the way.

In some of our meetings, I will specifically invite small business owners, and entrepreneurs in their 20s, 30s and 40s to offer specific and concrete suggestions on what they and their colleagues need to boost their businesses.

Our economic recovery will require collaboration, creativity and boldness of spirit in order to imagine and to build a new 21<sup>st</sup> Century economy post-COVID-19.

I continue to ask for your ideas and suggestions as we move forward to build a better future.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Bahamians are beginning to go back to work. But tens of thousands still remain unemployed and in need.

To continue to meet the needs of many of our citizens, the Government will extend yet again the unemployment benefit assistance through January 2021.

This extended unemployment benefit programme, which is funded by the government but administered by NIB, has benefited 36,959 Bahamians whose employment benefits ended after the

customary 13 weeks, or who otherwise would not qualify for unemployment.

The payouts for this programme at the end of November totaled just over \$70 million.

The extension of the programme through the end of January will mean that tens of thousands of Bahamians will continue to get some measure of assistance until they are called back to work.

Similarly, the Government will extend its food distribution programme for the first quarter of 2021 with an allocation of another \$10 million dollars to provide food assistance to the most vulnerable in our society.

This programme has to date provided assistance to over 100,000 Bahamians.

I want again to thank the many businesses, civic groups and individual citizens who have given their money and their time

over and over again to help support the government's feeding programme and many other programs.

Thank you, again, also to the Non-Governmental Organizations that have worked tirelessly as part of the National Food Distribution Task Force.

You have all recognized that the government cannot do it alone. You have risen to the call.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

We are fortunate in The Bahamas at this time.

For much of the world the pandemic has entered its worst phase. Grim records set in the spring are being surpassed.

Across the world, surging cases have led to various versions of lockdown, some for very long periods.

Leaders are grappling with what to do next. Some are extending restrictions.

Others are trying to find a new mix of measures to battle still high infection rates, high hospitalization numbers and many deaths.

There are concerns of collapsed health systems, which would cause even more deaths.

Our situation is stable.

New case numbers and hospitalizations have fallen in recent weeks.

Our policies worked. Your hard work in following the rules paid off.

Across our archipelago many islands have few to no restrictions. Residents can go about their lives mindful of the general public health measures.

In the places where light restrictions exist – islands such as New Providence – we have recently been able to relax some measures and allow more openness.

We only use emergency measures when absolutely necessary to save lives. This is the worst emergency in our modern history.

When the situation improves on a given island, we relax the measures. We act to prevent our people from getting sick and to save lives.

We must keep at the public health measures that worked:

- Keep wearing your masks
- remain physically distant when out;
- wash or sanitize your hands regularly;
- and stay away from large social gatherings.

Due to the high COVID-19 numbers in so many countries, I also still recommend that you not travel outside of The Bahamas at this time, unless for an emergency.

Do not loosen up your discipline.

For many Bahamians, Christmas is one of the most sacred times of the year.

At Christmas, we commemorate the birth of Christ. It is a time of family, friendship and renewal.

2020 has not been the year any of us wanted. Dreams were put on hold, and normal life interrupted in so many ways.

The regular, close human interactions that make life so meaningful were taken away from us.

As we end this year, let us ever remember in prayer the families of those who lost their lives due to the virus.

They were our brothers and sisters, colleagues, neighbors and friends. They will all be missed.

Let us also thank and celebrate the frontline healthcare workers who are caring for the sick and have saved so many lives. They are heroes.

They continue to do the hard work each day in the battle against this deadly virus.

I have been impressed by their dedication to our people in these terrible times.

I once again offer a personal thank you to our healthcare workers and members of the uniformed branches for all that they have done, and all they continue to do.

During this Christmas, let us be especially grateful for our blessings during one of our most difficult years as a people and as a nation.

Let us recall in gratitude the many blessings of our country and those who have given us so much.

In this spirit, please allow me to express gratitude for the life of Ms. Betty Cole, who passed away yesterday morning. I offer condolences to her family and friends.

Betty Cole gave a lifetime of service as a teacher, coach and mentor. She taught many generations of Bahamians to swim.

She devoted herself to nurturing many generations of guides in the Girl Guides and in the development of many young people.

She had a fierce wit and sense of humor, a generous spirit and a great love of her country, to which she devoted her life and considerable energy.

Even as we remember her life and spirit, may she be an example and inspiration to us all.

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

I saw a spiritual reflection recently that spoke of an “Advent of the heart” and described Advent ““as a way of life,’ where we live with a fuller understanding of our ultimate need and dependence on God [at all times].”

This year, more than most, we have had to place our trust in our God, on whom we depend for life itself.

Let us never tire of thanking Almighty God for our individual blessings and our blessings as a country.

May the God of New Beginnings grant us new life and hope this Advent and Christmas.

I could not have gotten through this year without your prayers, your words of encouragement, your acts of kindness and your abiding support.

Permit me to once again ask for your prayers and support, which sustain me in good and in difficult days.

Despite the many difficult days of this year, I thank God every day for the privilege to serve you and to serve the country we all love.

Thank you, my fellow Bahamians. Thank you!

Please be safe and careful and please continue to follow the health guidelines.

Thank you and good afternoon.