



NATIONAL ADDRESS (2) – COVID-19

The Most Hon. Dr. Hubert Minnis

Prime Minister

23 March 2020

My Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Good evening.

The COVID-19 virus and threat that the world and The Bahamas are facing is a matter of life and death.

While most people who contract the virus will recover, many have died and many more will die around the world.

More than fifteen thousand people have died around the world so far.

What is frightening is that we do not know how many people will suffer from the virus and how many will die.

This virus is so serious and so potentially dangerous for some, that people are dying in large numbers in the richest, the most powerful and the more developed countries in the world.

In the worst hit places they announce hundreds of deaths per day – with the highest toll so far being near 800 dead in one day in a country in Europe.

Those countries have more resources than The Bahamas.

Yet, they are having the greatest difficulty fighting this virus.

We cannot afford to let this deadly and dangerous virus spread widely in our country. If we do we will have many deaths.

But let me tell you what we do possess as a country, what we are doing and what we must do, together!

We have tried to act earlier and more decisively than a number of other countries.

But, we should have no false sense of security.

As Prime Minister, as a medical doctor and as a former Minister of Health, who has had to deal with deadly viruses before, I had to act decisively and quickly to protect the Bahamian people.

During this crisis, we put in place emergency orders as soon as possible.

But now, we must do even more in order to save lives. We are in a race against time.

So, tonight I am announcing additional extraordinary and emergency measures contained within a new and additional Emergency Order, entitled “Emergency Powers (COVID 19) (NO. 2) Order, 2020.

These additional measures have been agreed to by the Leader of the Opposition, who I consulted with at the Office of the Prime Minister earlier today.

To ensure that the public understands what the Emergency Order entails and to answer questions, the Attorney General will appear on local talk shows.

A representative from the Official Opposition is expected to do the same.

We will keep you informed with the best information we have at the moment during what is a fast-moving and rapidly evolving battle.

These new Emergency Powers and Regulations come into force at 9 am

tomorrow March 24, 2020 and will expire on 31, March, 2020 at 9 am.

Let me emphasize that the Order that came into effect last week remains in effect.

This new Order and the previous Order may be found at opmbahamas.com, which I encourage you to visit for information.

I now advise you of a number of the new provisions and measures.

“A curfew is imposed every day for 24 hours except as provided [in the Orders] or may be approved by the Commissioner of Police.”

“In an effort to prevent the spread of COVID 19, every person shall remain confined to their place of residence (inclusive of their yard space) to avoid contact outside of their family except –

(a.) Essential workers who report to work;

(b.) Workers required to work under Order 5;

(c.) For essential travel to doctor, grocery store, bank, pharmacy or to refuel;

(d.) For outdoor exercise, whether alone or together with family members living under the same roof, not exceeding an hour and a half per day between the hours of 5:00 a.m. to 9 p.m. Provided that such person must ensure at all times to distance

himself at least six feet (6ft.) from any such person.”

(2) “For purposes of this order, an ‘essential worker’ includes essential officers of”:

- The Royal Bahamas Police Force,
- The Royal Bahamas Defence Force,
- Fire Services,
- the Department of Correctional Services,
- the National insurance Board,

- the Department of Social Services,
- the Department of Environmental Health Services;
- the Department of Immigration;
- the Customs Department,
- waste and sanitation companies;
- any hospital, health care or medical facility.

Essential workers also include:

essential officers of any water, electricity or other sector encompassing the

provision of electronic communications including print and electronic media.

All of these essential workers should at all times carry personal identification.

Order 5 which I noted details the closure of businesses and the exceptions.

This may be found at opmbahamas.com and includes workers exempted from the curfew for the purpose of work.

Further: “Every human establishment must –

(a) Ensure that all customers and staff maintain physical distancing of no less than six feet (6 ft.) in or outside their business;

(b) Determine the number of persons that may be permitted in the establishment at any one time by permitting one person for every thirty square feet of store space;

(c) Within twenty-four hours of the commencement of this Order, place distance markers six feet apart, indicating where each customer must stand on a line at a check out point;

(d) Within twenty-four hours of the commencement of this Order, place distance markers six feet apart on the outside of the establishment, indicating

where customers must stand while waiting to enter the establishment.”

Let me note that supermarkets will be encouraged to designate a specific shopping time for seniors, from 9am to 11am daily.

Owners will also be strongly encouraged to enforce physical distancing inside and outside their establishments.

“For the purposes of preventing, controlling and suppressing the spread of COVID-19, with immediate effect –

(a) Except without prior written permission of the Competent Authority), all airports including private airports and fixed-base operations (FBOs) shall be closed to incoming international flights carrying any visitor;

(b) All sea ports shall be closed to regional and international seafaring and private boating; and

(c) “No visitor shall be permitted to enter and disembark for any reason including transmitting through The Bahamas.”

(2.) The restrictions do not apply to:

“ (a) outgoing flights or ships, as the case may be;

“ (b) cargo flights or cargo ships, as the case may be;

“ (c) commercial courier flights;

“ (d) emergency medical flights;

“ (e) emergency flights approved by the Civil Aviation Authority.”

“No person shall offer for hire or seek to travel on any –

(a) Mail boat, sailing inter island, except for transport of freight; or

(b) Inter island private commercial sea transport, provided that the Competent

Authority may vary any of the requirements [noted in this] Order.”

“The Fish Fry situated at Arawak Cay and other occasional markets throughout The Bahamas shall close.

“The Potters Cay Dock and every other dock throughout The Bahamas shall be closed to any commercial activity and sales of anything to the general public, including fish, conch or any such catch.”

I wish to note that, “All public beaches shall be closed.”

Additionally, “no person shall drive a vehicle on any public or private road for a purpose other than stated in Order 5 or 7” of the new Order.

“The Royal Bahamas Police Force shall have powers to stop any vehicle and inquire as to the purposes for which that vehicle is being utilized; and to arrest anyone found in violation of this restriction.”

Vehicle includes a motor vehicle or motor bike.

Let me again note that this Order and the previous Emergency Order may be found at opmbahamas.com.

Do not pay attention to sites and to social media messages which may contain false information and fake Orders.

Look to reliable Government websites and information.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

We are still learning about COVID- 19, which is an enemy to our lives and to our livelihoods.

Like most health matters, prevention is one of our most important strategies.

We must limit and prevent a greater spread of this virus.

While the emergency orders are difficult for some, it is better to do what we need to do now, rather than paying a greater and heavier price later.

Too many Bahamians have not taken this threat seriously enough.

Many people still don't understand the toll this virus is taking on other countries.

To stop COVID-19 from spreading, each of us is a soldier or warrior in this battle.

Our personal and collective behavior is the best way to fight this threat.

Do not invite people over to your homes to socialize.

Do not hang out with friends.

Do not have house parties.

If you do not heed the warnings, you could catch this virus.

It could kill you.

You could spread it to your friends and families and it could kill them too.

By listening to our advice you will save your life and that of your friends and family.

I want to speak directly and clearly to every young Bahamians.

You are not immune to this virus.

You are made of flesh and blood.

None of us is invincible.

Though COVID-19 is especially dangerous to older people, younger people have also died in other countries.

You could die too or become very sick, especially if you have certain underlying health challenges.

In Exodus 20:12 we are admonished:

“Honor your father and mother, so that your days may be long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.”

Dear Young Bahamian Brothers and Sisters:

Honor thy father and mother that your days may be long and that their days and lives are not burdened by this deadly virus.

Honor your grandparents, aunts and uncles and other older family members.

Honor your elders and seniors.

By your actions, by your discipline, by your behavior and through your love, you will either help to save lives or you may put other lives at risk.

The very life you may put at risk is someone that you love.

My Fellow-Bahamians and Residents:

The scenes in other countries, including rich, developed countries, are frightening.

In some cases the military has been called in to move the large number of dead to funeral homes for cremation.

People are dying in medical facilities without friends or family around because

they are in isolation to prevent the spread of this virus.

These are possible grave and stark realities we may face here if Bahamians do not listen to the advice given by the Government and public health officials.

Everyone is at risk if we have a surge of cases that overwhelms our health system.

We are seeing countries struggle with such surges.

In every place where the healthcare system has been overwhelmed, deaths increase dramatically.

What we will face over the next few weeks depends on how well we as a people listen to and heed good public health advice.

If we do, we will have a better outcome.

If we do not, and we are slack, there will be many deaths.

Let us be at our best in this fight.

Again, I plead with you: Stay at home!

Follow what public health officials say to you.

Encourage your family and friends to do the same.

If we are disciplined and careful we can overcome this immense crisis.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

I know that during this time it is difficult being away from friends and family and your daily routines.

We have put in place these measures for your safety.

They will only last as long as is necessary.

Most countries have put in place similar measures due to the magnitude of the threat.

During this period we must stay close to each other despite being physically apart.

Call and message your loved ones regularly – especially older friends and relatives.

Have video chats to stay in touch.

At home, play games as a family.

Read or do some sort of creative project like drawing or art work.

Pray unceasingly.

Help your children with work the school may have set for this period.

Watch movies or shows together.

Let us transform social media into channels of love, care and support.

Do not send fake news or negative things.

Go outside on your property with your family and play games.

Sit and have conversations as a family.

In the busy times of everyday life we often do not have time to all sit in our homes and talk together.

It is important to stay engaged together and to give friends and family support and encouragement despite being physically apart.

Let us be people of generosity and gratitude.

This is not a time for spirit of negativity.

Please pick up you phones and through WhatsApp, text and voice notes, through Facebook and through other social media, send a thank you note to any nurses, doctors, health care professionals, police and defence force officers and public officers. Send them thank you notes.

Encourage them with your prayers, love and support.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

We are facing a major health threat and a massive economic threat.

I want to tell you about how we are responding, especially to help the most vulnerable in our society and those facing possible unemployment and other challenges.

The National Insurance Board will be encouraged to engage hotel owners about the possibility of advancing NIB unemployment benefits on behalf of the Government.

This would reduce the numbers having to physically go to NIB to collect payments.

Hotel companies will be reimbursed by the Government.

The Government will immediately enter into discussions with the Central Bank and the banking sector as to how they may assist Bahamians affected by COVID-19.

We will let you know the outcome of these discussions.

I also wish to reemphasize what the Minister of Finance stated last week.

The banks have reiterated their commitment to helping their clients through challenging times.

“They have advised that if individuals are experiencing financial difficulties during this period, that they should contact their banks to understand the options that are available to them, such as payment deferrals, credit limit increases, or other measures to offer temporary relief.

“As this issue progresses, the banks have stated their intent to offer more

tailored products and services to persons who financially are negatively impacted by the economic effects of COVID-19.”

“Further, the government is committing \$20 million in short term loan support to Bahamian small businesses impacted by the current COVID-19 situation ...

“Eligibility would include confirming that the business has been in existence for over 1 year, a commitment to retain most of the existing staff complement, and a plan to

utilize the proceeds of the loan to ensure business continuity.

“Under the Accelerate Youth Apprenticeship Programme, we will expand and accelerate training opportunities in the construction trade to support rebuilding efforts in Grand Bahama.

“The Ministry of Works will reprioritize capital projects to increase the number of quickly deployable small-scale capital works to boost small business activity.

“The Government will [also] accelerate the approvals process for all domestic and foreign capital investment projects currently in the pipeline.”

My Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

I recently read this spiritual advice from a religious minister that was very helpful to me and Patricia and my family.

I wish to share this meditation with you.

The minister wrote:

“ ... Panic and fear are not from God. Calm and hope are. It is possible to respond to a crisis seriously and deliberately while maintaining an inner sense of calm and hope.

The minister went on to say: “Don’t lend credence to lies or rumors, or give in to panic.

He also said:

“Panic, by confusing and frightening you, pulls you away from the help God wants to give you.

It is not coming from God.

“What *is* coming from God?

“... God’s spirit ‘stirs up courage and strength, consolations, inspirations and tranquility.’

“So trust in the calm and hope you feel. That is the voice to listen to.”

That is the voice of the God who made and sustains us.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

This coming Wednesday, March 25th will be a National Day of Prayer and Fasting. More details will be forthcoming.

Please continue to pray for our country and for those on the frontlines of this battle, which includes: “pharmacists, teachers, caregivers, store clerks, utility workers, small-business owners and employees.”

May I also ask you for your prayers, which continue to sustain me every hour.

I want to especially thank the members of the National Coordinating Committee for all of their hard and good work.

The religious minister I spoke about earlier also said:

“Many things have been cancelled because of the coronavirus. Love is not one of them.”

I wish to add:

Compassion has not been cancelled.

Generosity has not been cancelled.

Gratitude has not been canceled.

Hope has not been cancelled.

Nor have resilience and courage and the spirit of The Bahamian people.

None of these have been cancelled.

Moreover, they are in abundant supply and can never run out.

Dear Fellow-Bahamians, Residents and Friends of The Bahamas:

We will endure.

We are a people of the rising sun.

We will win this battle through courage, through generosity of spirit and with a resilience, that no hurricane, no virus, no economic threat and no enemy can defeat.

Our God reigns.

We will win this battle with His grace and His guidance.

And when this battle is won, let us pray to the God of New Beginnings to help to heal our land and to help us to rise again.

Thank you and good evening.