



National Address

The Most Hon. Dr. Hubert Minnis

Prime Minister

9 August 2020

My Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Good afternoon.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, I have spoken to you on a regular basis to update and to inform you on our comprehensive and vigorous national response to this very contagious and deadly virus.

I have sought to encourage you, as well as to warn you of the danger of this virus to you and your loved ones.

Through these national addresses, press engagements, and direct dialogue with the Opposition, business and labour stakeholders, the religious community, and civil society, I have sought to unify the nation in the face of the terrible and

widespread threat and effects of the virus on our health, our economy and our way of life.

Let me say to you this afternoon:

Even with the resurgence of the virus we are experiencing, I want you to know that through courage, resilience, a spirit of hope, and unceasing prayer, we will overcome this virus.

We will rebuild our economy and our society.

I wish to provide you with updates and information.

There are specific priority issues that I want to share with you, and some of the details on how we are addressing them.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Most of the world is experiencing a resurgence of the COVID-19 virus.

International news reports indicate that in larger countries someone is dying of COVID-19 approximately every eight minutes.

This virus is so easy to catch and to pass on, that it took approximately 100 days to spread around the world, affecting just about every country.

This is unprecedented and extraordinary in the history of pandemics.

Here at home, there are 777 active cases of COVID-19, including 35 in hospital.

Today, the Ministry of Health reported 20 new cases. The total number of confirmed cases is 898. These cases include:

- 417 in New Providence;
- 389 in Grand Bahama;
- 45 cases in Bimini, inclusive of 6 on Cat Cay;
- 28 cases in Abaco;
- 12 cases in the Berry Islands;
- 3 in Cat Island;
- 3 in Exuma; and
- 1 in Eleuthera

Our four leading priorities during this pandemic are:

- preserving life and health;
- providing basic social security and food assistance to those in need;

- boosting jobs and our economy as much as possible given the devastating blow to our tourism-based economy; and
- ensuring the security and safety of Bahamians and residents.

I wish to address various aspects of each of these priorities.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Our response to this global pandemic has required your government to make sizable, non-budgeted financial investments to utilize privately owned facilities.

Like even more advanced nations, we have had to make these added investments because the public healthcare system

is severely limited in its ability to accommodate infected patients requiring inpatient care because of COVID-19.

The Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH) had an inpatient complement of four hundred and twenty beds.

We are living in a health care environment with dramatically increasing use of health services by more critically ill patients, as well as social cases at PMH.

There is also an exponential growth in healthcare costs.

The current pandemic and the need to strengthen Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) practices, coupled with adherence to social distancing requirements, had led to an inevitable reduction in the overall bed complement at PMH.

The regrettable practice of leaving of elderly family members in the Emergency Department at PMH after they no longer require hospitalization, has given rise to recurrent long-term boarders.

Many of these patients have co-morbidities that make them particularly vulnerable to viral infections.

They should not be in proximity to highly trafficked areas frequented by those with communicable diseases.

As the Princess Margaret Hospital approaches capacity, with a limited number of hospital beds to treat those requiring inpatient care, the Public Hospitals Authority has sought alternate accommodations for the relocation of boarders.

An assessment team comprised of representatives from nursing, case management and hospital administration is examining sites to determine their suitability as a care center for PMH's thirty-three boarders.

The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Services will make the final necessary assessments and recommendations on accommodations to enable us to both further protect this vulnerable group, while making critical bed space available at PMH.

Given the exponential increase in confirmed cases of COVID-19 requiring intervention, the PHA has also engaged Super Clubs Breezes.

The plan is to utilize the east building of the hotel as a National Response Facility to meet the needs of non-COVID 19 “low medical care” patients during the pandemic.

This facility will accommodate both the employees that are attending the patients on one floor, and clinical and management operations on other floors.

Security services will be provided by the Royal Bahamas Defense Force, supplemented by a PHA contracted security firm.

This facility will be up and running very shortly.

I must note and be very clear that PMH is unable to manage this new patient care location without the tangible support of

physicians and nurses from the Department of Public Health and the wider community.

On behalf of the Government and people of The Bahamas, I thank Breezes for the role it has played as a corporate citizen during this pandemic.

The Government has only been asked to cover utility costs during the use of the hotel as the new national response facility.

Moving forward, clinical management of confirmed and suspected Covid-19 cases will be treated at the following locations on New Providence:

- a. South Beach Center – Mild to Moderate Presentation
- b. Princess Margaret Hospital – Moderate to Severe presentation

c. Doctors Hospital Health System (West) – Moderate
to Severe presentation

PMH will continue the management of medical and surgical patients at the main hospital.

The relocation from the Princess Margaret Hospital of boarders and the establishment of the National Response Facility off-site, will make available more beds so that COVID-19 patients can be more easily accommodated at PMH.

Doctors Hospital West is also increasing its bed capacity to help address the need.

The combined strategy to increase bed capacity in the public and private healthcare systems will result in an increase of approximately eighty patient beds at this time.

On Grand Bahama, the Cancer Society Building was retrofitted to house infectious diseases patients, including COVID-19 patients.

In addition, a new unit is being constructed on the Rand Memorial Hospital site.

As it relates to Grand Bahama and all other Family Islands, if the need arises, individuals will continue to be airlifted to New Providence where the increased capacity has been prepared for the care of patients.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Recently, there has been some debate about the adequacy of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) within the public health system.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, The Bahamas, like most countries around the world, was faced with the realization that PPEs were among the most vital defenses in fighting the spread of the virus.

PPEs are essential for safety and protection, primarily in acute hospital settings.

Let me state that the Government has made the necessary investment in PPEs to ensure that all public healthcare workers, be they frontline staff or support staff, are properly protected while performing their duties.

This also ensures that those seeking treatment within our institutions are afforded the best care in the most sterile environment possible.

The inventory of PPEs is monitored daily. Key personnel within the Supplies Management Agency identify the quantities of each specific stock on hand; the amount distributed to each public healthcare site; as well as the quantity of new supplies received at our warehouses.

I am advised that any temporary shortages within wards or units when they occur, are short-lived as the Supplies Management Agency uses a top-up system that facilitates restocking as soon as inventory reaches a pre-determined level.

Let me also note that I have met with the leaders of the Nurses Union, Consultant Physicians Staff Association Union, the Bahamas Doctors Union and the Public Service Union.

These meetings focused on COVID-19-related matters.

To better benefit from the expertise and advice of the leaders of these unions, there will be separate biweekly meetings between myself, the Ministry of Health and the Doctors Unions and the Nurses Union and internal briefings to union representatives from the Emergency Operations Centre.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

The Government has established a Contact Tracing Command Centre at the Melia Hotel to address urgent matters related to contact tracing in The Bahamas.

The Centre is manned by a group of public health experts with support from the Surveillance Unit, National Health Insurance program, other government ministries and agencies, and private partnerships, including Aliv and the Melia Hotel.

This Centre will strengthen the Surveillance Unit's ability to identify new cases and contacts, and to intervene with the appropriate measures.

Health officials anticipate an increase in the number of new cases over a short period of time.

A decrease in new cases is anticipated once all new cases and contacts have been identified.

It is important that members of the public cooperate fully and honestly if they are contacted by the Surveillance Unit.

Your responsible behaviour can help reduce the spread of COVID-19 in The Bahamas.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

The pandemic has caused countries across the globe to put in place restrictions to protect public health.

These necessary restrictions harm trade and commerce, slowing economies and causing joblessness and recession in order to save lives.

The Government has not laid anyone off or terminated contracts because of the current economic component of this crisis.

Our strategy for economic recovery is still being finalized.

I will have more to say about this very soon.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Access to food is a basic human right.

Around the world, and here at home, people who have been self-sufficient their entire lives are now struggling to feed themselves and their families.

Ensuring that our people in need are being helped is one of our leading priorities. We are investing heavily in food assistance.

In my contribution to the recent budget debate, I noted the allocation of \$16 million dollars for food assistance.

Your government is delivering on this commitment.

We are now providing \$1 million dollars per week to the National Food Distribution Task Force for food assistance, to ensure those who are truly in need of food are being helped.

Our Food Task Force is making every effort to preserve safety and dignity.

I understand the unique situation so many of you find yourselves in, never imagining that you would ever have to seek assistance to have enough to eat.

It is important, at this point in the program, to emphasize that first and foremost the Task Force is implementing a needs-based program.

We have set out to help those in our communities who

are the most vulnerable.

As we move forward, the Task Force will begin to apply criteria to help objectively place people who register into three needs categories. The three categories include:

- Most Vulnerable,
- Moderately Vulnerable, and
- Least Vulnerable.

Assistance to these groups will be weekly, every other week, and once a month, respectively.

This is to ensure that priority is given to those most in need.

We are so grateful to people like Mr. Knowles, who I am told registered for food assistance but recently wrote back to

the Task Force saying, "I am well and God has provided me with more than enough, so I don't need any further assistance. Please provide it to those in need."

Mr. Knowles' noble action enables the Task Force to stretch the budget and help those who really need it most.

We thank Mr. Knowles and others like him, who understand that even in these difficult times, there are those who are in deep, deep need while others are not struggling as much.

The Food Assistance program is entering its 11th week.

To date, 27,705 households have registered for assistance, representing more than 110,000 people across the length and breadth of our country.

I have asked the Food Task Force to reach out to small grocery stores so that arrangements can be made for food vouchers to be purchased from stores throughout our country.

We would like neighborhood “Mom and Pop Shops” to participate in, and benefit from, this exercise with us.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Your safety and security are paramount.

The Royal Bahamas Police Force continues to monitor possible criminal activity and to use its full complement of resources to help to prevent crime.

The establishment of the COVID-19 Enforcement Unit, which will also utilize police reservists and civilians, will significantly increase the capacity to enforce various measures, including quarantines and other measures designed to reduce the spread of the virus.

The Atlantic Hurricane season does not end until November 30th.

Both the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and the Disaster Preparedness Ministry remain on full alert.

You should ensure as many basic preparations as possible.

To assist with your preparedness, hardware stores are currently open for curbside services on Monday Wednesday and Friday.

Construction is also permitted Monday thru Saturday.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents on Grand Bahama,

I acknowledge your anger and frustration with the extension of the lockdown, and other changes.

I need to state that the measures being taken in respect of Grand Bahama are not random or arbitrary.

They have been strongly recommended by public health officials. The Government is resolute in seeing the island restored to good health.

Health officials provided a brief this morning on the situation on Grand Bahama.

The COVID-19 outbreak there, is still not under control. In fact, it is very grave.

I beg you in Grand Bahama, please, give the process more time. We have beaten this before, and can do so again, together.

You have expressed concern about access to food stores, given unique challenges that some continue to experience as they recover from Hurricane Dorian.

As such, like Abaco, your shopping days will return to Monday thru Friday for the general public. On Saturday, the hours will also be extended for essential workers.

My Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

I would like to address the lockdown conditions for Abaco and its Cays.

Over this past weekend, additional unique provisions were announced for Abaco and its Cays, including the addition of days to allow for grocery shopping and restaurant curbside and takeaway services.

Abaco is still rebuilding from the devastation of Hurricane Dorian.

Some residents do not have access to the resources available during normal circumstances.

These provisions have been made to accommodate the unique circumstances on the island and its cays created by the ongoing recovery and reconstruction efforts related to Hurricane Dorian.

Throughout the pandemic, Abaco and Grand Bahama have been permitted to continue construction, have some access to hardware and have access to gas stations to fuel generators.

There is a genuine effort to consider the needs of our people, while seeking to restore the health of the Nation.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

As I have said previously, restrictions for public health purposes will not extend beyond what is thought to be absolutely necessary.

I am announcing today that based on the advice of health officials, normal commercial and social activity, including church services and the opening of beaches and parks, may resume on the following islands, effective 5am Monday, the 10th of August:

- Mayaguana;
- Inagua;
- Crooked Island
- Acklins;
- Long Cay;
- Long Island;
- Rum Cay; and
- Ragged Island.

The lockdown and curfew have been lifted for these islands because health officials have not recorded any suspected COVID-19 activity at these locations for at least two weeks.

Though there are no confirmed cases on San Salvador, a travel-related swab is pending test results.

Further assessment is required for this island before it can be given the all clear.

Travel between the islands where the lockdown has been lifted will be permitted without the COVID-19 testing and 14-day quarantine requirements that are outlined in the Emergency Powers Order.

The Government, guided by the advice of health officials, will continue to monitor and assess COVID-19 developments on each island and determine, on a case by case basis, when it is safe to relax measures.

For the remainder of The Bahamas, our observations over the first few days of the lockdown reveal that there is a genuine need for greater access to food stores.

We are hopeful the following changes will help this, while not compromising the public health objective.

These include:

- The extension of food store hours to 7pm on Monday, Wednesday and Friday;
- The extension of food store hours to 6pm on Saturday for essential workers; and

- Enabling food stores to restock on Tuesday, Thursday and now Sunday, to ensure that shelves are fully stocked for the designated shopping days.

The Bahamas Pharmaceutical Association has raised issues regarding the services its members provide.

Members of the public have also raised concerns regarding access to laundromats.

We will continue discussions with the health professionals on these two areas.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

We have a long journey ahead with this virus.

Do not be misled by conspiracy theories, fake news magical thinking and fake therapies.

We have to learn to live with this virus until there is a vaccine, pursuing the best policies and behaviors to allow commerce and interaction while also limiting infections.

You all know the public health advice: be physically distant; wear yours mask properly; wash and sanitize your hands regularly; and do not attend mass gatherings.

As a Government we must learn from the policies we introduced that require adjustment.

Let me be very clear on this point:

I do not like lockdowns.

I am also a businessman.

I understand that small businesses are the heart and soul of our economy. Lockdowns disproportionately hurt small businesses.

I also know that lockdowns have an adverse effect on mental health and our emotional well-being. We are social creatures.

We need our friends, colleagues and loved ones as part of a meaningful life.

We use lockdowns as a last resort.

When cases get out of control and no other measure would work, then we move to a lockdown.

With Dorian hitting a year ago and now the pandemic, our nation faces the most difficult period in our lifetime.

To call this time unprecedented is an understatement.

We must all work in unison through behavior, thought, practice and policy to prevent the spread of the virus and to renew our land.

Selfish or misguided action by any one of us could put the whole nation at risk. That's how serious the times are.

This afternoon I once again express my heartfelt thanks and appreciation to the vast majority of Bahamians of all ages and circumstances who have demonstrated understanding and exercised great discipline in this struggle.

I speak of those who have steadfastly co-operated with efforts to save the lives and protect the health of their fellow Bahamians.

These are the ones who are demonstrating the true-true Bahamian spirit which has brought us through many trials and tribulations in our long history.

They have followed the protocols advised by our Health officials.

They have respected the orders put in place for the protection of their loved ones and their neighbors. Indeed, for the protection of us all.

My brothers and sisters, I am grateful to you and I am inspired by you.

Unfortunately, here at home as in other countries around the world, it seems there are always some contrary souls who, for their own reasons, simply refuse to co-operate.

Some of them may be educated but they do not have much mother's wit.

Some even go so far as to minimize the threat. Some try to undermine and mischaracterize our efforts.

Some try to sow the seeds of dissension at a time when we so desperately need national unity.

Some who really ought to know better, have attempted to undermine the steps we have taken in our efforts to control the spread of COVID-19, including curfews and lockdowns.

But I only ask of them to consider whether, in these circumstances, it is worth it to undermine public health and put at risk the very lives of their fellow citizens.

Because it is to protect public health and save Bahamian lives that we have mandated curfews and lockdowns.

Only that and nothing more.

My Fellow Bahamians:

We enjoy the fellowship of shared citizenship.

We are bound together by the bonds of family and faith.

We have a shared destiny to build a new Bahamas.

It is always with great pride that I address you as “Fellow Bahamians” and fellow citizens.

Let us pray together for courage, and a spirit of resilience and hope.

And may the God of New Beginnings guide and protect us always.

Thank you.
