



National Address

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

Sunday, 28 June 2020

3:00 P.M.

My Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Good afternoon.

I thought it essential to address the nation as we are about to enter a new period or what some have described as a “new normal” during the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic.

Most of our country and economy have reopened, though, with certain necessary restrictions. Our phased reopening continues.

Effective tomorrow, Monday, June 29th, 2020, beaches and parks will reopen on New Providence, Paradise Island, Grand Bahama and Bimini.

Like the phased re-opening of our economy, the tourism sector is also being re-opened in phases.

Fifty percent of our GDP is derived from tourism, which employs directly and indirectly up to 60 percent of our working population.

The first phase of the re-opening of international tourism began on the 15th of June with the re-opening of our international borders to private aviation, yachts and pleasure craft.

On Wednesday the 1st of July 2020, we will enter into Phase 2 of the Tourism Plan when our international borders will re-open for international commercial flights.

Also, this coming Wednesday:

- hotels and vacation rentals which may have been closed, may reopen.

- taxi services may resume based on guidelines in the Ministry of Tourism and Aviation's Bahamas Tourism Readiness & Recovery Plan;
- Private and public bus services may resume, with 50 percent occupancy based on guidelines in the Ministry of Tourism's Bahamas Tourism Readiness & Recovery Plan;

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

I wish to advise you of a number of specific areas of Emergency Powers (COVID 19) Orders.

For the avoidance of doubt, the following touristic components remain closed until expressly permitted as part of the phased reopening: attractions; excursions and tours; vendors, including straw vendors; and Jet Ski operators.

On July 13th, attractions and excursions and tours may reopen.

On July 27th, vendors, including straw vendors may reopen and Jet Ski operators may recommence operations.

Masks are to be worn by all persons, Bahamians, residents and visitors, entering and exiting our beaches.

Please be reminded, gatherings on the beaches of more than five persons are strictly prohibited. This will result in a fine under the Emergency Orders.

Our enforcement teams will be monitoring this risk closely.

Mass gatherings may result in the immediate closure of the respective beach.

Additionally, depending on the results of the beaches monitoring during this upcoming week, we will make a determination on whether the beaches will remain opened or closed on the Independence Holiday weekend.

These measures are for the ongoing protection and safety of Bahamians and residents.

Fellow Bahamians and residents,

Let me note the following entry requirements for The Bahamas.

- It remains the case that persons will be required to undergo an RTPCR COVID 19 molecular diagnostic test administered by an accredited lab prior to returning The Bahamas.
- Effective 7th July, the results of the RTPCR COVID 19 test must have been taken no later than seven days prior to the date of arrival. Until that date, tests that have been taken no later than 10 days prior to travel will continue to be accepted. We have made the window of time for testing shorter for the protection of Bahamians and residents.
- Bahamians and residents returning to The Bahamas from countries where they cannot obtain the COVID 19 RTPCR test,

may be permitted entry. We want our people to be able to return home. However, they must clearly demonstrate that the test was unavailable. They will also be subject to mandatory quarantine for fourteen days upon arrival in The Bahamas.

- Bahamians and residents who have departed from The Bahamas and are returning after a period of seventy-two hours or less are not required to undergo a RTPCR COVID 19 test.

Let me explain this further.

Because of the difficulty in obtaining a PCR COVID-19 test result within three days, Bahamians and residents returning home from a trip abroad over a period of 72 hours or less are exempted from having to provide a PCR COVID-19 negative test result to re-enter the country.

However, these travelers will have to quarantine for two weeks upon their return home.

In both instances, the period of quarantine time may be reduced if the traveler opts to take a COVID-19 test upon arrival in The Bahamas and the result is negative.

The traveler will be responsible for the cost of the test.

- All persons entering the country may be subject to thermal temperature checks.
- All persons entering the country will continue to be monitored by the Ministry of Health.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents,

Effective Wednesday, 1st July, another area of importance to citizens and residents will reopen.

Gyms and outdoor group exercise may reopen with health safety protocols approved by the Ministry of Health.

I note that masks are not required during exercise. This includes both indoors and outdoors.

However, persons must wear their masks up to the point that they are about to begin exercising and immediately after they have completed their exercise routines.

Additionally, they must have their masks visibly and easily identifiable on their person during their exercise routines.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents,

We recognize that we are entering a new phase in our fight against COVID 19.

To ensure compliance with and enforcement of the Emergency Orders, the Royal Bahamas Police Force has been

charged with leading the establishment of a new COVID 19 Enforcement Unit.

The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Tourism will collaborate with and assist the Royal Bahamas Police Force.

- I note that there will be fines for persons, including Bahamians, residents and visitors not wearing face masks of \$200 or one month imprisonment, or both.
- Additionally, we have already made it an offence for a business establishment to allow patrons to enter or remain in that establishment without a mask. The fine for this offence on the first occurrence will be \$500 and on the second occurrence the fine will be \$1,000. On the third occurrence of this offence, the business establishment may be temporarily closed or required to pay a greater level of fines.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

We are reopening our society and economy with careful deliberation.

We are guided by our very talented health experts in The Bahamas.

Our dynamic team of Bahamian professionals are in turn guided by international experts and best practices from around the world, including lessons learned from previous pandemics.

Like other jurisdictions that acted early, our task is to reopen with as minimal risk as possible, though risk cannot be eliminated because this epidemic is still raging around the world.

You might be asking:

“Why are we able to reopen more broadly, even as a number of other countries and jurisdictions are experiencing a surge in new infections, hospitalizations and deaths?”

We are reopening because we must carefully balance the health, economic and social needs of our people in order to secure our country in the medium- and long-term.

We have to reopen to get more Bahamians back to work and to get businesses and the economy back to work.

Like a number of other countries, we are reopening because we have been successful in arresting the community spread of COVID-19 in The Bahamas.

We have had a total of 104 confirmed cases to date.

It has been 14 days since a new confirmed case of COVID-19 has been recorded on New Providence; 53 days since a case

was recorded on Grand Bahama; and 43 days since a case was recorded on Bimini.

There are no hospitalized COVID-19 cases.

Bimini is recovering very well, and our other Family Islands remain COVID-19 free to date.

We have had a total of 11 deaths.

I once again offer the nation's prayers and condolences to those who lost loved ones here at home.

We have also had a limited number of hospitalizations and adequate ICU beds over the course of 99 days.

What we have done as a people has come to the attention of the international community as other, more advanced, countries have struggled with the virus.

We were among those nations who required masks or covering early in the pandemic.

The world has taken note of the manner of our bearing.

We should all be very proud of what we have done in a spirit of love and unity.

In a BBC News interview last week, a professor from UCLA stated that the response of The Bahamas to COVID-19 has been, “excellent”.

But our success and our progress have not been easy.

There has been widespread pain, suffering and struggle by the Bahamian people.

The lockdowns, curfews and other measures were a tremendous burden for so many for many long months.

But your sacrifice has not been in vain!

Because we acted quickly, decisively and deliberately, we saved lives and protected the general health.

Our health care system, though strained, did not collapse.

Indeed, we acted quickly so that we could gradually reopen as quickly as possible.

Because we acted boldly and firmly, we are able to reopen our society and economy in a safer manner than many other jurisdictions, which are now suffering great loss of life, scores of deaths, hospitalizations and greater uncertainty.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

We have succeeded thus far because you rose to the occasion.

You met this great challenge by observing the many measures put in place for the protection of your families, neighbors and fellow citizens.

You took to heart the words of encouragement from the great Bahamian E. Clement Bethel, which I again wish to paraphrase:

“When the road seems rough, when you’ve borne enough, don’t cry, don’t sigh ... just keep on trying ... This time will pass, tomorrow’s another day.”

With a heart overflowing with gratitude, admiration and abiding love and appreciation, I thank you for your sacrifices and devotion to country.

I am extremely proud to serve as your prime minister.

When I get vex sometimes, like when I see some people not observing the health measures, it is out of care and concern.

Please allow me to thank you for sheltering me and other officials in your hearts, in your unceasing prayer and in your words of encouragement and hope.

Let us continue to sustain one another.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

We arrested the community spread of COVID-19 because the Government has had the advice of our excellent Bahamian health care professionals, as well as the expertise and assistance of the World Health Organization and the Pan-American Health Organization.

We have succeeded because of the great work of those on the frontline, in our hospitals and clinics, and in the field tracking the virus.

We have succeeded because the men and women of the Royal Bahamas Police Force have enforced the law.

We have succeeded because of the work of the Royal Bahamas Defence Force, and the many public officers and public citizens, who joined together as a Citizens Army to combat this deadly virus on so many fronts.

I thank the businesses that are doing their part by enforcing the health measures in their establishments.

Fellow Citizens and Residents:

We have come this far by faith and fortitude.

But we are by no means out of the woods as yet. We still have a long and difficult road ahead.

As we continue the opening up our economy and the social life of the nation, I appeal to the faithful majority to hold steady.

But you know too well that there are always some who, for one misguided reason or another, will refuse to cooperate, or try to frustrate our best efforts.

I appeal to those who have been less cooperative to join the rest of the nation as we navigate the dangerous shoals ahead.

I appeal to them on the basis of our traditional Bahamian civility, that civility for which we as a people are widely known.

Civility is simply our expression of respect and concern for others.

As we seek to open up our economy and restore our society, let us remember that it is about preserving the health of our people, it is about saving precious lives.

It is also a good thing for our future economic prospects because, if we can maintain our reputation of having handled the

pandemic well, then that in itself will attract visitors to the Bahamas.

Let us take traditional Bahamian civility to a new level.

Let us take Bahamian patriotism to a new level.

We must be responsible as individuals. But we also have a social responsibility to others.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

We should not allow the easing of various restrictions to lead us to do things we might regret and that might harm others.

I want to make a very strong plea to Bahamians and residents considering or planning to travel overseas for nonessential travel -- to not go overseas at this time.

If you are thinking of travelling for non-essential or non-emergency reasons, please, I beg you, stay at home at this time.

Please stay at home!

A number of the cities and areas Bahamians and residents like to frequent in neighboring countries and cities are experiencing a dramatic rise in COVID-19 cases.

Many of these are hotspots where this very contagious virus is widespread.

If you travel to these areas and go to malls, shops, restaurants and other establishments you might catch the virus.

You could bring the virus home and community spread could start again.

Let me be as clear as I can:

Your actions can damage the health of others and your actions could help worsen our economy if we have to lockdown again.

Let me speak directly to our wonderful young people for a moment.

Dear Young People:

Young people are less vulnerable to getting seriously sick from COVID-19.

However a number of young people around the world have gotten very sick or died from the virus.

Some have passed on the virus through community spread and passed it on to parents, grandparents and older relatives, some of whom have died.

There is still so much the world still does not know about this virus.

While some, including many younger people, may seem to not to get very sick from the virus or show no symptoms, medical science does not yet know if the virus will leave serious damage to their health that will reveal itself in the years ahead.

If you go to a large gathering or you don't practice the various health measures, you might pass the virus on to an older person, including the people you love most.

For your own sake I urge young people to observe the life-saving measures, especially wearing masks or face coverings.

But most of all I urge you to wear masks out of consideration for other people: for the sake of the stranger, for the sake of your own loved ones, for the sake of our nation.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Around the world, countries that re-opened have experienced upswings in COVID-19 cases.

This is a possibility here too as international borders reopen, inclusive of travel by Bahamians, residents and visitors.

In order to minimize the resurgence of the virus as we reopen our borders, it is important that all Bahamians, residents and visitors observe public health measures and guidelines.

So, keep doing what you are doing. Face coverings limit the spread of respiratory particles, as does being physically distant from others.

This virus spreads human to human through close contact when an infected person spews respiratory droplets.

Let me say that in more direct words: If you stand close to someone without a mask covering your mouth and nose, and they have no mask on, they could expel the virus as they talk to you.

You could breathe it in and become infected.

By wearing a proper face covering we protect one another.

It is a sign that we are our brother's and sisters' keepers.

Many people who spread this virus are asymptomatic.

This means they look healthy and do not have symptoms.

They are not coughing or sneezing. They do not have fevers.

But they may be shedding the virus and cause other people to get sick.

If you are in close contact with asymptomatic people and they don't have on a mask or face covering, and nor do you, you could catch the virus from them.

We must wear our masks and face covering properly. Your mask is supposed to cover your nose and mouth.

It is supposed to cover your nose and mouth for the entire time you are out.

It is unacceptable for you to have your mask over your mouth and not your nose. It is even more unacceptable for you to have your mask just over your chin.

I have seen Bahamians openly gather in groups talking and hanging out without their masks once they get out of stores and businesses.

We all have to do better than this.

Let us encourage each other to do the right thing. Government alone cannot bear this work alone.

The restrictions and measures we followed help to stop community spread of the virus in The Bahamas during the first wave.

However, we are not done in this fight.

If you stop following the advice, if you start being slack, if you do not wear your masks, if you stop following the rules, the virus will come back.

If it comes back in a major way, I will be forced to reinstitute longer curfews and lockdowns.

I do not want to do this.

But your Government will have to if necessary in order to save lives.

This pandemic will not end until there is a vaccine and the majority of the world's population is vaccinated.

No one knows when that will happen.

Disciplined countries and disciplined peoples will do better in the interim. Countries that don't listen, peoples who don't follow the rules, will "catch hell".

Peoples who listen to their public health professionals and live by that advice will have better outcomes and fewer deaths.

We still don't know the long-term consequences of the virus.

Indeed, as Dr. Dahl-Regis continues to say, “The story of this virus is still being written.”

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

I want to briefly address a matter that is in the public domain.

The media and other social platforms recently published stories on an investor’s draft proposal for Andros.

In the draft proposal there are concepts for the development of half a million acres of land, aragonite harvesting, medical research facilities, air and seaports, and other developments.

The Office of the Prime Minister issued a statement acknowledging that the draft proposal was submitted.

The proposal has not been formally analysed nor reviewed to determine its viability, nor has it been presented to the National Economic Council for consideration.

I have been disappointed to see how this issue has been misused by the Opposition to sow confusion in our country.

Let me be very clear for all to hear. This Government will not grant a free-trade zone in Andros.

Nor will we alienate or sell-off vast tracts of Bahamas land as a previous PLP administration allowed in Mayaguana, when 10,000 acres was alienated to a foreign group.

My Government has not approved the proposal.

We welcome Bahamian and foreign investors submitting proposals that are win-wins for the people of The Bahamas and for the investors.

At this time of great economic hardship we need all the appropriate investment we can get.

However, my Government will not approve concepts from Bahamians or foreigners we think are not in the best interest of the Bahamian people.

Do not allow yourself to be confused by those who went to Grand Bahama last week, behaving as if they were the government duly elected by the Bahamian people.

As a people, we must remain focused on the twin crises in front of us. COVID-19 has caused a health crisis and an economic crisis.

And we are still rebuilding Ragged Island, and Abaco, the Abaco Cays and Grand Bahama following Hurricane Dorian.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

I reminded you at the outset of the pandemic, that we are a resilient people, who have built one of the most successful small nations in the world.

In this spirit, we must also restore and transform our Bahamas beginning now and in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Let me end with some words I offered you at the end of my Budget Contribution last Monday.

My Government will do everything in our power to be there for them as we battle through these challenging times together.

We will come through stronger and more resilient if we work together as we have done over the past months battling COVID-19.

I believe in the Lord of New Beginnings, who is our fortress and our strength, our shield at all times, and from whom all blessings flow.

May God bless our Bahamas and may He grant us wisdom and discernment as we continue the long and hard work to restore and transform our Bahamas.

Thank you and good afternoon.
