



Press Conference Notes

The Most Hon. Dr. Hubert Minnis

Prime Minister

28 October 2020

Nassau, Bahamas

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press:

Thank you Dr. Dahl-Regis for your update and for your ongoing service, along with the service of everyone on the frontline of the pandemic.

This afternoon, I wish to address the country and the media on our ongoing and comprehensive measures to continue to aggressively respond to this terrible virus, after which we will take questions from the press.

This pandemic is exhausting and costly, physically, spiritually, emotionally and economically.

We continue to lose some of our fellow citizens to the virus.

I again offer the country's condolences and my personal condolences to those who have lost loved ones.

Let us continue to pray for those who are ill and who are recovering.

The major slowdown in global travel continues to devastate our tourism-based economy.

We all want to be back to our normal lives. But with this desire we must be reasonable and discerning.

We are working daily to try to balance the health, economic and social needs of our people throughout our archipelago.

The pandemic is far from over.

Sadly, the northern hemisphere is likely heading into the worst period of the pandemic.

With fall already here and winter coming, colder countries face a very challenging winter.

More individuals will be indoors in these places.

The virus spreads easier indoors where there is poor ventilation.

COVID-19 cases are soaring in countries around the world, including in the Americas.

Experts are saying that the next few months will be a “dark winter.”

In fact, the global COVID-19 public health emergency is worsening around the world.

By example, quite a number of European countries that were doing generally well and better over the summer, are now heading into a difficult and painful winter.

There will be many more hospitalizations and deaths in a number of European nations.

Let me say to the Bahamian people: Do not be misguided by those who engage in magical thinking.

They want to wish the virus away or think there is some simple solution to the complex challenges it causes.

Let me be very clear: All indications are that the pandemic will be with us well into next year.

We must incorporate the public health message of physical distancing, avoiding mass gatherings, mask wearing, and regular hand washing or sanitizing into our everyday lives.

We must also get used to the cycles of tightening and loosening restrictions.

Until there is an effective vaccine and the overwhelming majority of Bahamians are vaccinated, we will have cycles where cases go up and cases go down.

This will occur because the virus spreads easily, especially when we do not wear masks or go to social events, including family gatherings, where the virus may quickly and easily spread.

When cases go up on a particular island, we will have to increase restrictions if necessary.

But if cases are low on other islands, they will remain open, with less restrictions.

Restrictions are not a punishment for the island with a problem.

The restrictions are a public health tool to promote more physical distancing, which can save lives.

When cases are high, maintaining safe distances helps to reduce the spread of the virus.

It is important that we understand that these cycles of tightening and loosening of restrictions are part of life in the pandemic.

If cases spike and no restrictions are put in place the virus will run wild and infect and kill more people.

Countries around the world are going through their own similar cycles.

In fact, some jurisdictions in Europe are currently imposing more aggressive restrictions than we have in The Bahamas.

Some of them are going as far as multi-week lockdowns and stricter curfews.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Given the current situation throughout the country, the Cabinet has agreed to the following measures after consultation with our health officials.

Effective Friday, the 30th of October, an 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. weekday curfew will apply to New Providence, Abaco, and to Grand Bahama.

We want to, as quickly as possible, address any community spread on Grand Bahama.

On Grand Bahama, weddings will now be limited to 10, not including the officiant.

Also, on Grand Bahama, funerals will now be limited to 10, at the graveside only, not including the officiant and mortuary workers.

Due to the increase in COVID-19 related activity on Eleuthera, Spanish Wells and Harbour Island, the Ministry of Health will dispatch an emergency team to assess the situation, as was done previously on Bimini.

Following this assessment, a determination will be made on what specific measures may be needed for Eleuthera, Spanish Wells and Harbour Island.

On Abaco, food stores may now open on Saturday from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m.

All beaches and parks on New Providence and Abaco may open effective Monday, 2 November.

Groups are limited to 5 individuals and the COVID-19 Enforcement Unit will heavily monitor beaches and parks.

For the construction industry, companies on islands under 24-hour weekend curfew may apply to the Competent Authority for permission to operate over the weekend.

Effective Saturday, October 31, exercise is permitted in one's immediate neighborhood on Saturdays and Sundays, from 5 a.m. to 9 a.m. on New Providence and Abaco.

Before November 1st, tourism officials will provide a further update as it relates to the reopening of tourism, including information on the operation of restaurants and tourist-related activity.

Health officials will evaluate the rate of transmission two weeks following the re-opening on the 1st of November to further guide our response.

Let me be very clear: A negative RT-PCR test for COVID-19 is required for all individuals entering The Bahamas, including Bahamians and legal residents, regardless of the amount of time an individual has been abroad.

I wish to remind Bahamians and residents that you should have sufficient funds to cover the cost of the necessary test and any other COVID-19 related or medical expenses that may arise during your travel abroad.

Let me reiterate that the 24-hour weekend curfews remain for New Providence and Abaco.

Other measures outlined in the No. 8 Emergency Orders for New Providence and Abaco also remain in place, with the exception of the re-opening of beaches on those islands, and the operation of food stores on Saturday on Abaco.

We continue to advance a range of measures in our fight against COVID-19.

I thank those who have led and have been involved in our aggressive contact tracing program.

This includes, more recently, pilots and flight attendants from Bahamasair and our corporate partners, including BTC, Aliv and PriceWaterhouse, and those who have donated equipment and other resources to the command center.

Over the course of the pandemic, 230 individuals have been involved in the contact tracing process.

Of these, 170 are currently still assisting with contact tracing across the archipelago.

Of the 170:

- 119 are on NP
- 29 are on GB
- 6 on Eleuthera
- 4 on Abaco
- And the remainder are on other Family Islands.

Let me again note that we have increased our hospital capacity on New Providence.

Recently, in partnership with the Samaritan's Purse relief organization, we opened a 28-bed COVID-19 Isolation and Treatment Unit.

The tented inpatient facility is located adjacent to the Princess Margaret Hospital.

It also serves as a COVID-19 referral center for The Bahamas.

Along with the Minister of Health, I have met frequently with all of the testing labs.

The objective of the meetings is to increase the speed that results are provided to the Surveillance Unit.

The goal is for 48 hours. I am very pleased to say that there have been considerable improvements.

Where impediments have been found, such as the time it takes to get swabs to the testing labs from the Family Islands, mitigating measures have been put in place to expedite the

processing and testing once these swabs arrive at the labs in New Providence.

In conjunction with the Ministry of Health, a protocol has been put in place by the labs to request all symptomatic persons to quarantine until results are delivered.

This collaborative effort with the private labs will continue.

I wish to also note that we are making progress on another way to test that is less invasive. Health officials will have more to say about this in due course.

I also wish to again urge employers to be as flexible as possible to help reduce the risk of exposure and transmission.

Please allow those who can work from home to work from home, stagger work hours, and consider moving pay day to a day other than Friday to give staff more time to prepare for weekend curfews.

Let me again thank all in the business community who have continued to follow and to enforce the health guidelines and measures.

I wish to assure the business community and the private sector that we are working hard and diligently to balance the health and economic needs of the country.

I again thank the many corporate citizens who have shown extraordinary consideration to their employees.

I thank those businesses and private individuals who have donated money and goods, including donations of food, for those in need of assistance.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me again emphasize that our personal and collective behavior are the key to reducing the spread of this highly contagious and dangerous virus.

It has to be our shared mission to protect one another, especially our seniors and elders.

While enforcement is critical, few countries have the manpower and ability to fully enforce the health measures and restrictions.

This is why personal responsibility is essential. It is vital.

Many Bahamians have told me that they are deeply concerned and disturbed that some of us are continuing to host unnecessary social gatherings and parties, which are helping to spread the virus, leading to serious illness and death.

I was recently told of this story, which sadly represents so many other examples of those who still are not taking this virus seriously eight months into the pandemic.

A young man was frequently going out with his friends and frequently ignoring the lockdown rules by participating in parties in private locations.

Several weeks ago, his mother, who is in her mid-70s, and with whom he lives, began to display symptoms of Covid-19 infection and the infection was confirmed.

She was hospitalized for two weeks and was recently released but is now a shadow of her old self in that she now needs full-time care.

Who is the only full time care giver available?

It is now her son, from whom she caught the virus.

His lifestyle and wanton disregard for the pandemic rules have left his mother disabled and has now severely compromised his freedom.

We live in a community. There is no such thing as warding off less vulnerable younger people from more vulnerable older people as this case demonstrates.

We will continue to enforce and to ramp up enforcement of health measures and restrictions.

I again thank those who are following and complying with the health measures.

But, I will continue to stress that enforcement alone is not sufficient. We must also be personally and socially responsible.

The Government cannot be everywhere all the time, nor should it be.

In a democracy, we have to act as responsible citizens and be concerned about the common good.

Government has its responsibilities. But so do citizens!

In this spirit, I want to again raise the importance of adhering to the health guidelines, including when visiting with family and close friends.

During this pandemic, when interacting with anyone you do not live with it is better to do so at a distance outdoors rather than indoors. You should also keep your masks on.

This advice also pertains to visiting with family and friends.

If you decide to visit indoors we still recommend you maintain distance, you keep your masks on and keep windows open for better ventilation.

Since the beginning of the pandemic the home setting has been a major area for the transmission of the virus.

Do not let your guard down when visiting with family and close friends.

In the medical field, we begin with the assumption that anyone may have the virus.

It is normal to feel frustrated with the pandemic. We are all deeply frustrated.

Normal life has been interrupted for an indefinite manner. No one knows when this will end.

However, do not let pandemic fatigue cause you to lose your life.

Millions of people around the world have lingering COVID-19 symptoms. Some of these symptoms are very serious.

Scientists do not yet understand all the long-term effects of this disease.

They do not know how long the damage it causes will last.

We must adjust our minds to embrace the constraints of the times so you can make it to the post-COVID world healthy and strong.

Do not become reckless in frustration and catch this virus.

Researchers are making significant progress. In time there will be a vaccine and more medicines.

Follow the health advice so you make it to that time as healthy as possible.

Please be patient. Please be disciplined. Please stay safe.

Let me thank the many Bahamians, including church leaders and ministers, who daily pray for our country, and who are helping those in need.

I thank those ministers who have called me personally and who have offered their prayers for me and my Government.

We are sustained by these prayers and words of hope and encouragement.

I could not do this work without these prayers and without the love and perpetual blessings of the God who sustains us all.

My prayer every day is for our country, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable in our country, whom Scripture calls us to be at the very center of our daily considerations and concerns.

And every day and throughout the day, I continue to ask Almighty God for direction and discernment.

I ask Almighty God, that I might do what is right and good for the Bahamian people, whom I have the privilege of serving in this office.

I thank all Bahamians who continue to work in a spirit of love and unity, and who have chosen the spirit of togetherness over division and disunity.

We must continue to work together to defeat this virus as one people, united in hope and fortitude.

May God bless our Bahamas.

We are happy to answer your questions.
