



House of Assembly Communication

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

Wednesday, 18 November 2020

Nassau, Bahamas

Mr. Speaker:

I wish to provide the House and the country with a general update on the nation's ongoing efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recently, I announced restrictive measures for mainland Exuma, and mainland Eleuthera, due to exponential increases in new cases of COVID-19 on those islands.

As of yesterday, the 17th of November, there were a total of 99 confirmed cases of COVID-19 on Exuma, and on Eleuthera, a total of 143 confirmed cases.

A team from the Ministry of Health made up of members of the contact tracing team and the surveillance unit is currently on the ground on Exuma to assess the COVID-19 situation.

Health officials report that from the analysis of the map of cases, the spread is occurring throughout Exuma.

From interviews conducted in the community by the health team, some people are still having gatherings and residents believe this is largely contributing to the spread of COVID-19 on Exuma.

A health team is scheduled to return to Eleuthera next week to complete a follow-up assessment and to determine the impact of the recently imposed restrictive measures on that island.

On Grand Bahama, health officials report that the recent increase in cases on the island is due to a recent outbreak at an industrial company.

The industrial site has been closed, and a meeting is expected to be held this week with the industrial group and their subcontractors to review the analysis of the outbreak at that site.

All positive cases from the site remain in quarantine or isolation.

Health officials continue to closely monitor Exuma, Eleuthera and Grand Bahama.

The Ministry of Health will provide a further update at its press briefing.

I wish to remind every Family Island and cay, especially those not under curfew, to continue to abide by health protocols, including wearing a mask, adhering to physical distancing and hand washing regularly.

Please also avoid large gatherings and social events.

As we have seen on other islands, and as domestic and international tourists begin to travel to more Family Islands, there is a greater likelihood of the spread of the virus.

To avoid restrictive measures, I ask every Bahamian, no matter which island, settlement or community you live in, to please follow the well-known health care measures.

Wearing a mask is a lifesaving measure just as are antibiotics and medicine for other health challenges and diseases.

No responsible person would tell someone with high blood pressure, diabetes or an infection not to take their medicine.

Just like these medicines, the public health measures help to prevent infection and to save lives.

We wear seatbelts while driving and flying for our protection.

We should also wear masks and avoid large social gatherings to protect our own health and the health of others.

Let me briefly clarify two frequently asked questions in the public domain.

Church services in the sanctuary are permitted during the week on New Providence and Abaco, in accordance with the guidelines established by the Bahamas Christian Council.

Memorial services and services in funeral parlors are not permitted on New Providence and Abaco.

Mr. Speaker:

Most of the world, including popular tourist destinations, have put in place extensive protocols for tourists and for returning citizens and residents who have travelled overseas.

The Bahamas is no different. We are following various international protocols and adjusting them as necessary.

As we are set to receive an increase in international visitors next month, I wish to repeat that everyone traveling into The

Bahamas from the U.S. or any other destination must have a valid negative COVID-19 RT-PCR Test.

This Test must be taken no more than five days from the day of travel.

We are getting many reports of Bahamians having a COVID-19 RT-PCR test taken in The Bahamas prior to their travel overseas and then attempting to use those results for their Travel Health Visa and return to The Bahamas.

I wish to be very clear and to remind Bahamians and residents travelling overseas that no COVID-19 RT-PCR test taken in The Bahamas is valid for a Travel Health Visa in order to return to The Bahamas.

Mr. Speaker:

Everyone, including citizens, residents and visitors, entering The Bahamas must also have the international travel health visa.

These new travel and entry protocols have now gone into effect. These create a two-pronged approach to fight COVID-19, inclusive of a health screening survey and testing.

For anyone, including citizens, residents and visitors, staying longer than four nights and five days in the country, a rapid antigen test must be administered on the fifth day of their arrival in The Bahamas.

There are places to obtain these tests throughout The Bahamas.

Where there are no private medical facilities, government clinics may be used.

In addition to these public health measures, the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Tourism have launched a daily on-line health screening survey.

This survey is provided through the travel.gov.bs website.

All individuals, including citizens, residents and visitors, traveling into The Bahamas, will be required to complete this short survey on-line each day for approximately 14 days.

The health screening survey is an important part of preventing the spread of COVID 19 and ensuring that The Bahamas is safe for all to enjoy.

Participation in this survey is mandatory. Those who fail to comply will be subject to penalties.

Citizens, residents and visitors who do not complete the survey will be fined \$100 per day or one week in prison.

For visitors, they will also be deported.

The health survey will enable the further monitoring of and response to any possible instances of COVID-19.

The Ministry of Health will also be studying the results of the health survey to scientifically test and to evaluate the health protocols.

Mr. Speaker:

Very soon, a domestic travel health visa will also be implemented for travel from New Providence, Grand Bahama, Abaco, mainland Exuma, mainland Eleuthera and Bimini to other islands in the country.

This does not apply to travel between Exuma and its Cays and Eleuthera and its surrounding islands.

The domestic travel health visa will replace the 14-day quarantine requirement for those traveling from New Providence.

The domestic travel health visa, like the international travel health visa, will include the same two-pronged approach to fight COVID-19, inclusive of the daily health screening survey and rapid antigen testing on the fifth day.

This domestic travel health visa must be presented to air and sea carrier operators before boarding an aircraft or marine vessel.

If this requirement is breached, the carrier or owner of the vessel is subject to a fine of \$2,000 for every passenger travelling without the domestic travel health visa.

The passenger will also be subject to a fine of \$1,000.

I wish also to note that for the time being, a negative COVID-19 RT-PCR test is required only for travel from New Providence, Grand Bahama and Exuma.

Mr. Speaker:

We are fortunate in The Bahamas.

Our public health measures have worked and are working.

We have brought the virus numbers down in the pandemic's second wave.

However, across North America and Europe cases are surging at a record pace.

Some are saying that the coming winter will be: "a disaster", "a dark winter" and "hell."

Hospitalizations are so much on the rise that in some jurisdictions they have run out of hospital beds.

Large field hospitals have been erected to take care of the overwhelming number of sick people.

Deaths have increased too.

Some jurisdictions that did not or refused to require masks, are now mandating mask wearing, something The Bahamas did at the beginning of the pandemic.

Countries that did generally well in the first wave, including in the developed world, are now experiencing an alarming increase in cases.

In response to the surge in the Americas and Europe, countries and jurisdictions are implementing other aggressive restrictions.

These range from curfews and selective closures all the way to full national lockdowns for a period of many weeks.

What is deeply concerning is that public health experts expect conditions to worsen as it gets colder and more people are indoors.

It is important that as a people we watch responsible and fact-driven news and keep informed as to what is happening globally.

The Bahamas is doing well in its pandemic response.

We should be grateful for this.

We have battled through the waves, learning what works and what does not.

We have refined our policies to allow for as much opening up as possible.

And when the conditions call for tightening, we do so only as much as is necessary.

Bahamians should be proud of their country and our health experts and medical personnel.

We should be proud that this little Bahamas is fighting through the worst global public health crisis in 100 years.

Mr. Speaker:

As a result of the extraordinary spike in cases in North America and Europe – and the ongoing challenges in the Americas as a whole – as Prime Minister, I advise all Bahamians not to travel outside of the country at this time unless for an emergency.

There are several reasons why I offer this advice.

The record number of cases in the northern countries means there is significant virus transmission there.

Travelling to a COVID hotspot could cause you to catch it.

Additionally, as I have mentioned, many countries have overwhelmed hospital systems.

If you get sick in a foreign country that is overwhelmed by COVID-19, it might be very difficult to get medical treatment.

Additionally, as we saw in the first wave, when virus cases surge countries may quickly change their travel policies.

Borders could shut suddenly with no set time as to when they might re-open.

Imagine if someone decides to take a four-day pleasure trip and only carry enough money for that.

Then all of a sudden the country closes its borders for months.

How would they take care of themselves?

How would they afford food and accommodation?

When would they be able to come home?

It is exceptionally risky to leave The Bahamas at this time.

Please, I beg and plead with all Bahamians to stay at home, unless it is absolutely necessary to travel overseas.

I know there is COVID-fatigue.

I know that many people want a break.

If someone needs to take a break, they might consider going to one of our Family Islands where travel is permitted, following the public health guidelines.

I ask Bahamians to spend that money in The Bahamas with Bahamian businesses that employ Bahamians.

They will have a good time and will help our economy.

We should be careful and sensible when it comes to where we travel.

We could have a very difficult third wave if we are lax in our behavior and in our travels.

If you have to go overseas because of an emergency, please wear a mask, maintain physical distancing, avoid large gatherings, and wash your hands thoroughly and often.

Mr. Speaker:

We are progressing through the pandemic.

There is increased hope that medical innovations are on the way to bring it to an end.

In recent weeks, there were two encouraging announcements in the United States regarding vaccine candidates.

Both vaccines demonstrated high levels of success in phase three trials.

There is hope that medical frontline workers in the U.S. may begin to be vaccinated as soon as next month.

While we all should be pleased with this success, we must be very realistic with our timelines.

It will take time before newly approved vaccines in the developed world become available in the developing world.

We are working with the World Health Organization and others to secure vaccines for The Bahamas.

Until that time, we must keep up with our public health measures of mask wearing, physical distancing, and hand washing and sanitizing.

These measures work. They are saving lives.

The virus has caused restrictions and disruption all over the world.

The virus has slowed economic activity at different times and to different degrees all over the world.

Despite the difficulty of the times, I am confident that The Bahamas will overcome.

Most of our people largely comply with the public health measures, and I thank them for following the public health measures.

Our people are resilient.

Our people are hardworking.

Our people will get through this together.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been difficult but it has not broken our spirit to thrive and prosper.

The truth is that The Bahamas is doing much better than many countries in the world.

It is truly sad and deeply unfortunate that some people aggressively opposed the most recent Emergency Orders passed in the House.

The measures in the Orders, which are similar to measures throughout the world, which helped to significantly bring down the number of cases and helped to save lives.

On another occasion, I will have much more to say to those who opposed the extension of the emergency orders.

Mr. Speaker:

With vaccines emerging, there is light and hope on the horizon.

Bahamians should remain focused and stay positive in their outlook.

They should ignore those who are endlessly and predictably negative, and those who always complain about The Bahamas, or root for failure.

Instead, let us celebrate those who are helping our country to get through this unprecedented time.

The Bahamas is a great little country with extraordinary people.

Many Bahamians are impressed at how our doctors, nurses and medical professionals have cared for the sick.

Many are impressed with how our businesses have helped enforce the public health measures.

I am impressed with the NGOs who partnered with the Government-funded feeding programme to provide food for tens of thousands of Bahamians in need due to the economic fallout of

the pandemic, and who are now focusing strictly on the most vulnerable in our communities.

To date, the Government of The Bahamas has spent approximately \$18 million dollars on food assistance for our people.

I am impressed with the new small business owners, who are turning crisis into opportunity and hope for the future.

We have to fight for our future together!

Our future will be better once we keep working together in a spirit of love and unity.

May God continue to guide and to bless our Bahamas.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

