



CONTRIBUTION
of
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(Bamboo Town)
Minister of Health

**Contribution to Debate on Resolution to Extend Emergency
Order**

**House of Assembly
Parliament Square
Nassau, N.P., The Bahamas
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Mr. Speaker,

I rise today in the strength of Almighty God, “for In Him we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28). **Mr. Speaker**, the Apostle Paul went on to say in (2 Corinthians 2:14) that, “Thanks be to God, who always leads us to triumph in Christ and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere.” **Mr. Speaker**, This Scripture, I see as an ample description of our journey throughout the first and second waves of COVID-19 in The Bahamas. For Indeed, **Mr. Speaker**, The Lord has led us to triumph and we thank Him.

Mr. Speaker,

I rise also on behalf of the people of Bamboo Town to second the Motion of the Member for Killarney, the Most Honourable Prime Minister, to extend the Emergency Order to the 23rd day of May 2021.

Mr. Speaker,

“Complacency is a blight that saps energy, dulls attitudes, and causes brain drain. The first symptom is satisfaction with things as they are. The second is rejection of things as they might be. “Good enough” becomes today’s watchword and tomorrow’s standard.”

These are the winsome words penned by twin brothers - Alex and Brett Harris who co-authored 2 books by the age of 21. In their book "Do Hard Things," they encourage teenagers not to go with the flow, but to accept challenges that will stretch limits and expand skillsets.

Mr. Speaker,

This is the attitude we have to maintain when dealing with this ferocious pandemic. We cannot go with the flow. We must accept challenges to explore and grasp better ideas-then grow. We cannot sit back and wait for results; we must continue to think outside of the box to drive the results we wish to continuously achieve. And this Mr. speaker, is in fact what we have done, with The Bahamas now becoming a model for other countries.

Mr. Speaker,

The Bahamas has been placed on many lists over the years, some not so good and others glowing. I am pleased to advise my people that

we have now been recognized amongst 27 countries, by an independent body of scientists, as one of the countries who have gotten it right in our COVID-19 Fight. This Mr. Speaker gives further credence to the efforts of us all to flatten the curve of the second wave and minimize spread of the virus in a sustained way by collectively following the public health measures.

Mr. Speaker,

Indeed, our Emergency Orders, travel protocols, in-country testing protocols, model has been adopted by first world countries with large pools of intellect and many many more financial capabilities. It is a fact that our neighbors to the North has now taken our example and is in full implementation mode.

This mindset, the mindset of our creative and innovative approach to COVID-19, is extremely important at this time **Mr. Speaker** as the pandemic is not over. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr. on complacency "This is no time for apathy or complacency.

This is a time for vigorous and positive action.” And this FNM administration has been engaged in both.

Mr. Speaker,

I just quoted Martin Luther king Jr But, in regard to the challenges we faced in with this pandemic COVID-19, I want to and will now quote a colleague in this place who I believed captures the moment. I quote, “The COVID-19 pandemic is already categorized as the defining global health crisis of our time, and the greatest challenge we have faced since World War Two. Countries are again heavily involved in imposing border restrictions, limiting travel, scaling up testing, treating the infected and quarantining those that pose a risk. Conversations about inventories of medical supplies such as masks, gloves, personal protective equipment and ventilators are the order of the day. Large gatherings have been cancelled, contact tracing has become a household term and schools have been limited to the confines of the home. COVID-19 has touched just about every continent on the planet except Antarctica. It has already threatened

to leave very deep wounds and scars of social, economic and political crises. Mr. Speaker, “The world has never seen anything like this. The world is in uncharted territory and The Bahamas is not exempt.” That was the former Minister of Health, the member for Elizabeth, Dr. Duane Sands, who stated that in this place on... in fact, that was April 6th 2020.

Mr. Speaker

What he said has borne out to be true. With more than 98 million confirmed cases and over 2 million deaths worldwide..... and still counting, the COVID-19 menace will long be remembered as a global game changer.

Mr. Speaker,

Facing those kinds of challenges what did we as a Government do. The Bahamas, **Mr. Speaker**, in accordance with International Health Regulations (IHR) obligations, has long had protocols to prevent, protect against, control, and provide a public health response to the

international spread of disease. With the emergence of the novel coronavirus, noting the gravity of what was eventually renamed SARS COv2, the virus causing COVID-19, a multisector taskforce was convened in January 2020 of last year, one year ago, to bolster our readiness in every sphere and on every island. At that time, Mr. Speaker, as Minister of Transport and Local Government, I was happy to lend my support to the Ministry of Health.

On the 15th of March 2020, after the first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed in The Bahamas, the Health Emergency Operating Committee (EOC) was fully convened. This is a good time to acknowledge and to thank members of the EOC, who meet on a daily basis for months to guide the decision-making of Government. As I indicated, they met every single day (weekends included), to have intellectual conversations, formulate conclusions to guide policy and procedure, and act on those decisions. For indeed the creative and intellectual mindset spoken to earlier was the cauldron of Health's EOC from which cultivation, preparation and launch occur.

Mr. Speaker,

The gratitude of the Bahamian people, the government and that of mine, this Minister, for our Health professionals exemplary work in saving lives cannot be measured.

Mr. Speaker,

Indeed, The Collaboration among team members and the agencies they represent continues and remains unprecedented. Their dedication to duty on behalf of the people of The Bahamas may oftentimes seem thankless, but they press on though weary, continuing to convene even now, though less frequent so as not to neglect other priority health matters which many have been placed on backburners to contain the first and second wave outbreaks. Mr. Speaker, I dare say, we do not want a third wave. There is too much at stake in our nation in regard to our health and economic prospects. We must continue, we must continue, to contain this virus.

Mr. Speaker,

In the first wave of this pandemic, a number of healthcare workers volunteered their services. These men and women took

their position at the frontlines and stood on the wall. They treated the sick, comforted the weak and prepared the dead to receive their last respects.

Many of our healthcare workers have faced great odds, found new thresholds and overcame adversities they never thought they would face. They have learnt more about themselves through the COVID-19 ordeal, just as Mahatma Gandhi advised, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” And indeed, those in the healthcare sector and on the frontlines have done exactly that during the first and second wave in combatting this virus.

Mr. Speaker

Our experience in the second wave of this pandemic was more intense than that of the first. We faced bigger challenges -

- there were greater numbers of COVID-19 cases;
 - in the first wave we had– 104 cases

- in the second wave to date – we have 8140, however Mr.

Speaker the curve is flattened..... but we are not to zero yet

Mr. Speaker more persons were seriously ill during the 2nd wave.

- there were higher numbers of hospitalizations; and
- dwindling bed and ICU capacity, for COVID and non COVID patients.

Mr. Speaker,

Other nations have not fared so well during their 2nd wave, Indeed, much grief and despair has been experienced globally and in our beautiful country but thanks be to God, the institution of sustained, as well as intermittent containment and mitigation measures, those Emergency Orders which drove public health measures, has **now, has now** permitted a measure of normalcy to be achieved with glimpses of the pre-COVID-19 days.

Mr. Speaker

Thanks to those measures, total confirmed cases as at January 25, now stand at 8,140. Eighty three percent (6,746) have recovered.

New cases have remained less than twenty cases daily for the past month with a seven-day moving average of 9.6 cases down from a high of 108.7 at our peak back in October 2020. Hospitalizations declined to a low of three (3) on January 10th with a rebound and stabilization to low double digits, currently holding at 12. As of yesterday:

- There are zero COVID-19 patients hospitalized in the Grand Bahama Health Care System.
- In New Providence, there are zero hospitalized COVID-19 patients at Doctor's Hospital at this time.
- There is 1 COVID-19 patient being treated at the South Beach Acute Care and Referral Centre.
- At the Princess Margaret Hospital, there are 5 moderately ill patients with COVID-19, and no patients currently in ICU.

- At the Sandilands Rehabilitation Centre there are 6 COVID-19 positive patients, measures put in place at the SRC has ensure continued containment there.

Mr. Speaker

Currently in country our COVID-19 Deaths remain at 175 with the last death being a 62-year-old male on December 31, 2020. **Mr. Speaker, fifteen** deaths are still under investigation.

Mr. Speaker,

I want to remind the Bahamian people that The Bahamas entered its 2nd wave of COVID earlier than many countries and we have now again, as I said earlier, flattened our curve. The Bahamian people, government of The Bahamas, Health Officials, healthcare workers and frontline workers have done a fantastic job in curbing the spread of the virus in this 2nd wave, getting the results we are now experiencing. We must, now more than ever, adhere to measures put

in place to save lives and regain fully our livelihoods and economic prospects.

Mr. Speaker

We in spite of the strides we have made in the war against the invisible enemy, SARS CoV2 virus, again... we cannot rest on our laurels. We must keep our guards up. Other countries around the world remain in the second wave and some now are experiencing a third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The United Kingdom is in fully lockdown, Scotland until middle February at the earliest, England 31st March, Wales is for review at the end of January and Northern Ireland extended until 5th March. Lockdowns Mr. Speaker are occurring in the United Kingdom even in the midst of vaccine deployment there.

Mr. Speaker,

Germany is in a lockdown until mid-February with deaths having increased to an average of 1000 deaths a day for several

weeks. All of this happening while Germany is deploying the Pfizer vaccine.

Mr. Speaker,

With a nightly curfew currently in place in metropolitan France, there are reports of calls in France for a third lockdown to contain the virus as hospitalizations increase sharply there.

Mr. Speaker,

Our neighbours to the North, The US and Canada have also instituted more stringent measures to contain the rapid spread of COVID-19. As of yesterday the 26th of January, all travelers entering the US must now have a negative COVID-19 test result. Canada now requires a negative COVID test result with a mandatory 14-day quarantine or isolation. To the south, in the Caribbean, Prime Minister Mia Mottley of Barbados has announced that effective February 3rd – 17th, the island will enter a period of national pause, in other words lockdown. **Mr. Speaker, this pandemic is not over!!!!**

Mr. Speaker

Controlling the transmission of COVID-19 requires a combination of strategies. One part of that strategy is testing.

The Ministry of Health's testing protocol has not changed. The RT PCR test remains the gold standard in-country to diagnose COVID-19.

Rapid antigen tests have been added to our testing, guided by the National Protocol. Despite being less sensitive than the RT-PCR test, rapid antigen testing is relatively inexpensive and provides rapid results. This type of testing has the potential to provide wider access to COVID-19 testing at an acceptable turnaround time when there is limited access to RT-PCR testing.

Currently, there are two (2) antigen tests that have been granted World Health Organization Emergency Use Authorization –

- the SD Biosensor; and
- the Abbott PanBIO rapid antigen tests.

Both these tests have been independently validated and found to have high sensitivity and specificity in symptomatic persons.

The only drawback is that there are currently no published studies of rapid antigen test performance in asymptomatic populations.

Mr. Speaker

In regard to the Rapid Antigen Testing the Ministry continues to monitor adherence to its protocols. I anticipate that we will achieve a near 100% compliance with the US new protocol requirements.

Mr. Speaker,

To make a COVID-19 test available to a wider cross-section of Bahamians, we continue to explore other testing strategies.

The Saliva Test for COVID-19 is an alternative to the current nasal swabbing protocol. The Saliva test is an easy alternative to test symptomatic and **asymptomatic** persons by RT-PCR.

This test is a streamlined version of the RT-PCR test. This is because it is –

- cheaper than the currently used swab-based RT-PCR test;
- it does not involve swabbing the nose or throat of people; and
- it does not require viral extraction in the lab.

The saliva samples are easily obtained and stored at refrigerator temperature for 1 week. A swab can only be preserved for 3 days. This method offers benefits to the Family Islands for easy storage and transport.

Despite, the Ethics Committee approval for the SalivaDirect test to undergo an evaluation, by being piloting within the Family Islands, there has been pause in the pilot study. Initially planned to target asymptomatic positive persons, the study has been paused due to the successful decline in the number of new positive cases in country. The protocol is now being revised and adapted to our new improved reality.

Mr. Speaker,

The National Reference Laboratory will present its findings and recommendations as it relates to the performance of and potential future use of the SalivaDirect Test at the end of the pilot.

We hope to be able to utilize the Saliva test to enhance access to testing in the community as well as introduce greater cost efficiencies into the national testing policy in The Bahamas.

Mr. Speaker,

As you January 25, a total of 58,730 RTPCR tests have been carried out for COVID-19. Seventy-nine (79) tests were performed on the 25th, with 7 positives and 72 negatives. This reflects a positivity rate of 8.9% for the 25th January. When we look at the positivity rate for the past two weeks however, this is 4%. For reference WHO informs that a positive rate below 5% indicated that community is not occurring is, the spread of COVID is contained.

Mr. Speaker

With new variants of the SARS CoV2 virus manifesting, the National Reference Laboratory has and is instituting genomic surveillance of variants of concern (VOC)- A protocol and database for national genomic surveillance of circulating SARS-COV-2 strains has been drafted and is being operationalized. We have identified two reference laboratories to perform genomic sequencing- CARPHA and the PAHO reference Lab in Rio de Janeiro Brazil. Mr. speaker we are also looking to send samples to the CDC as well for sequencing.

Mr. Speaker,

An initial 40 representative samples from throughout the Bahamian archipelago, and spanning the first and second waves, are enroute to the Brazil reference lab for our first round of genomic surveillance and results will be reported to Ministry. The agreement with the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) provided for up to 10 samples weekly. Sequencing data will give guidance to our ongoing public health response and will allow us to definitely know whether there are variant strains present in country.

Mr. Speaker,

Surveillance, contact tracing continues to be essential elements of the COVID-19 fight, alongside well known and followed public health measures of mask wearing, physical distancing and sanitization. We have and continue to reap benefits from the institution of these measures. We must therefore continue to do our part in this journey toward our nation's full recovery.

Mr. Speaker,

The governments' move to train an additional thirty (30) persons as contact tracers early in the second wave of the pandemic continues to benefit the response. While only eight remain involved in the current daily contact tracing, a National Register has been created with over 100 persons who have been properly trained to conduct contact tracing. In addition, 16 of 40 persons who have applied for contact tracing positions are now being considered for hiring to ensure our capacities are augmented to quickly and easily scale up public health response when needed.

Mr. Speaker

If you are certain that you were in close contact with someone who has COVID-19, and you do not receive a call from Surveillance,

remember 511 phone line remains functional. Call the 511-phone line please. This number is the central portal for your COVID-19 questions, queries and reports. Again, do not hesitate to use it.

When you call 511, you should listen to the recorded message then select the number that best suits the purpose of your call. There you can enquire about contact tracing, access medical personnel, inquire about work and travel protocols, and report violations of public health measures or the Emergency Orders. The COVID enforcement unit and the Police will respond.

Mr. Speaker,

With the consistent implementation and adherence of sustained measures, we are beginning to get a glimpse, only a glimpse, of a COVID-free Bahamas.

Depending on the individual and collective behaviors we display however we can slip back into increasing cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

Even with the addition of -

- 28 COVID-19 acute care beds in the Special Pathogens Unit at PMH; and
- 15 at Doctors Hospital West, a third wave surge can be more challenging.

Mr. Speaker,

Through numerous capacity building exercises, the total bed capacity for COVID-19 cases has expanded to just under 150 beds in country and we thank the God lord for that achievement in our short six months' timeframe.

Mr. Speaker,

During the second wave, with increased bed capacity and increased positive cases of COVID-19, we needed increased numbers of Healthcare workers. The existing cadre of Healthcare workers were fatigued and at risk of being challenged to deliver optimal care to –

- COVID patients;
- Acute care patients; and

- Patients seeking preventive health care services.

To alleviate this challenge, we hired during the second wave29 physicians - Senior House Officers,

- 20 deployed at the Princess Margaret Hospital;
- 4 in the Department of Public Health;
- 3 at the Sandilands Rehabilitation Centre; and
- 2 in Freeport, Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker,

In addition, there were 55 nurses who sat the Nursing Council Examination of whom 49 were successful. Of these 33 who were sponsored by the Ministry of Health were immediately deployed.... within the Public Health Clinics (16) and the Public Hospitals Authority (17). Of the 14 who were privately sponsored, 5 have subsequently made application to be hired in the public sector, one in Department of Public Health and 4 in Grand Bahama Health Services.

Mr. Speaker

The past ten (10) months have been challenging and they have taken a toll on the resources of our country and the Bahamian people.

We are closer than we ever were before now at the beginning of

the end of COVID-19 in The Bahamas. This virus has disrupted our lives, robbed many of their livelihoods, threatened our mental fortitude, our sense of well-being, and stifled our cultural expression of Junkanoo which has been the hallmark of our stable Bahamian lifestyle and culture.

Mr. Speaker,

We are not alone! Globally there have been unprecedented sacrifices, losses and suffering due to this menacing pandemic. We will not shrug in the face of this fight, we will continue. Indeed, Churchill said, “never give up and never surrender”. Again, we are closer now than we ever were before.

Mr. Speaker,

There will be some time ahead before we can fully enjoy being a COVID-free nation again. With relaxed restrictions and reopening our mega-hotels, we must adhere to the preventative measures more than we ever did before. The relaxation of the COVID-19 restrictions

has given us greater freedom to move about more fully. More interactions will occur in small gatherings, churches and schools. We cannot fool ourselves into thinking that the virus is gone. **It is still here. It moves when we move. It will seek to infect every unsuspected host with the potential to spread to others.** If we are not careful, more could die.

Too many families have had to endure the pain of losing a loved one to COVID-19. Others may not have lost loved ones to the virus but may have lost the opportunity to pay their last respects in our usual, cultural manner due to COVID-19 related measures.

Mr. Speaker,

We need to continue in solidarity. Solidarity is the unity or agreement of feeling or action. It is mutual support within a group, especially among individuals with a common interest. When we do not have solidarity amongst ourselves, we lose the fight against COVID-19 in our country. Mr. Speaker, in regard to COVID-19 vaccinations, we need solidarity.

Mr. Speaker

For the last few weeks, the international community has witnessed the largest planned vaccination roll-out in history. COVID-19 vaccination roll outs are occurring across multiple countries, worldwide. As of 25th January, 68.4 million vaccinations have been reported.

World Health Organisation has identified COVID-19 as one of “Top Threats to Human Health”. A post-COVID Bahamas will not be possible without activating the fourth pillar of our response – vaccination of a sufficient number of Bahamians against COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker,

What gets measures get done! The Pan American Health Organization has established a COVID-19 Vaccine Introduction Readiness Tool (VIRAT) Dashboard for monitoring member state progress with preparedness to receive vaccinations from the COVAX facility. Monthly submissions from the country inform reflected level

of readiness on the dashboard. Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to advise that The Bahamas readiness is reflecting the majority 7 of 9 progress indicators in the maturity stages and the remaining two completed. These indicators inform timing of access of countries to the in-country delivery of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Mr. Speaker

That is to say, The Bahamas is well on its way to receiving the COVID-19 vaccine very soon. As I reported in my last communication, the Government of the Bahamas has committed to purchasing COVID-19 vaccines for 80,000 persons through the COVAX Facility. Other opportunities for accessing the COVID-19 vaccination are also being explored. With vaccines Pfizer, Moderna, Oxford, Astra Zeneca and Johnson & Johnson approved of in the advanced stages of development, securing access to additional vaccinations is now possible.

Mr. Speaker,

Equitable and efficient distribution of this vaccination once received, is high on the agenda of the Ministry of Health, having already developed and obtained Cabinet Approval for the National COVID-19 Strategic Plan. The National Vaccine Consultative Committee is providing support to the Ministry of Health technical teams to ensure all areas of roll out are clearly defined and resourced for rapid and efficient implementation once vaccines are in country.

Mr. Speaker,

Having a vaccine though is only one piece of the puzzle. Getting vaccinated is another. In other words, having a vaccine is beneficial to no one if we do not roll up our sleeves to take the vaccine. Vaccines have saved lives for decades! The purpose of administering a vaccine is to induce protection from disease through the stimulation of an immune response to that disease.

Mr. Speaker,

Vaccinations have saved lives for centuries. History records that in 1798 - Edward Jenner published his work on the development of a vaccination that would protect against smallpox. The last known naturally occurring case of **smallpox** was diagnosed on Oct. 26, 1977, in Merka, Somalia, according to the CDC. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared **smallpox eradicated** in 1980. "It was **eradicated** solely through vaccination."

Before the introduction of vaccines, many children became ill, disabled or died as a result of contracting one of the vaccine-preventable diseases. With sustained high immunization coverage, the Region of the Americas was certified as free of poliomyelitis in 1994, free of Rubella and Congenital Rubella in 2015, and free of Indigenous Measles in 2016.

Mr. Speaker

I reiterate the availability and accessibility of safe quality vaccinations have saved lives for decades. The Government of The Bahamas through the National Immunization Programme has

provided sustained access to the highest quality vaccines for infants, children and adults for decades, and our country has benefitted. Childhood diseases such as measles are only seen in The Bahamas through imported cases. Other countries have seen progress with reduced childhood hospital admissions due to vaccines.

Mr. Speaker

We understand that people are skeptical and concerned about taking the COVID-19 vaccine.

- Many have pondered the fact that the vaccine was developed in a relatively short time;
- Thousands are waiting to see the side effects that may come with the vaccine;
- Some are trying to determine the **efficacy** or performance of the vaccine under ideal, controlled conditions versus the **efficiency** of the vaccine or its performance under “real-world” conditions; and
- Others have cited religious reasons for not taking the vaccine.

Mr. Speaker,

I wish to assure the Bahamian people that the development of the vaccine has been done with great integrity and quality assurance. With the use of messenger RNA, scientists were able to produce a vaccine in a short time. Right now, the work of COVAX Facility is seen as the only solution to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr. Speaker,

It is noteworthy to mention that the coronavirus family of viruses is not new. Since the mid-2000s, scientists have been working to create a vaccine for this family of viruses.

Further, Mr. Speaker, it is no secret that the COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the vaccine development process to bring relief to a global crisis, but not at the expense of safety and quality. The science and evidence that went into producing the vaccine has been the gold standard. With the roll-out of the current vaccine, the international community is already experiencing falsification, thefts and illegal

advertising of the COVID-19 vaccine. Therefore, all Bahamians desirous of taking the vaccine should utilize a Government licensed and approved healthcare facility only.

Mr. Speaker,

We have indeed reached the beginning of the end of the COVID-19 pandemic which has ravished countries worldwide. With the continuous collaboration of the GAVI Vaccine Alliance, the World Health Organization and the Coalition of Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) Latin Americans and CARICOM nationals and including Bahamians will soon see the vaccine in a healthcare facility near you.

Mr. Speaker,

Hope is indeed on its way. In this year 2021, hope and expectation is quite high, and it is on its way. This year will be filled once again with hope, respect and admiration for the simple things in life such as the fine association with friends and family we all crave.

It is our fervent hope that we can all enjoy a state of some normalcy very, very soon. And until then, Mr. Speaker, May God bless you and may God bless the Commonwealth of The Bahamas.