



Contribution
of
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Minister of Health

Contribution to Debate on Resolution to Extend Emergency
Order

House of Assembly
Parliament Square
Nassau, N.P., The Bahamas
23rd September 2020

Mr. Speaker

“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.”
(2 Corinthians 2:14).

Mr. Speaker

I rise 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 31st October 2020.

Mr. Speaker

For The Bahamas, we are now at Day 194 of the COVID-19 pandemic...Day 194 since our first lab confirmed case on 14th March 2020.

Mr. Speaker

Pandemics are a time to persuade entire populations to suspend or modify their lives and livelihoods because of an invisible and existential threat.

While we have registered 3,467 confirmed cases to date, we give thanks to God for the people who have and are

recovering from what can be a fatal illness. As of yesterday, more than 50% of cases (1,871) have cleared the recovery hurdle.

We still have 1,489 active cases, with 4,188 contacts being followed, which means that we are far removed from safety in terms of transmission of disease.

More than that, deaths from COVID-19 continue to rise.....we have had 77 deaths across eight (8) islands ...too many despite the valiant efforts of our healthcare workers. The deaths reflect our population distribution with New Providence accounting for the

largest amounts (56) followed by Grand Bahama (14).

Mr. Speaker, I want to reiterate that we are still in midst of a pandemic.

And Mr. Speaker,

This 2nd wave is claiming younger lives when compared to the 1st wave. The average age of the deceased is twelve years younger at 61 years in the 2nd as compared to 1st wave at 73 years. However, it should be noted that the age range for forty-eight (48) percent of COVID-19 cases is 0 (newborn) to 39 years.

And, in contrast to the first wave there have been a number of deaths in this age range.

Mr. Speaker

The value of our healthcare workers has never been more prominent. Throughout The Bahamas and around the world, healthcare workers are focusing their efforts on preventing, diagnosing, containing, and treating Covid-19 patients.

They deliver care and services to the sick either directly as doctors, nurses, and emergency medical technicians, or indirectly as aides, laboratory technicians, pharmacists,

food service workers, space cleaners, transport officers, and medical waste handlers.

Every day they go to work, not knowing if they are going to be infected or will inadvertently infect others. They have apprehensions, yet they put them aside and focus on caring for others.

Mr. Speaker

I pause to say thank you and encourage all of them to press on, for as the good book says, “For I am confident of this very thing, that He

who began a good work in you will perfect it.”

Mr. Speaker

The global effects of COVID-19 are not lost on any of us. We sounded the alarm in this Honourable House and in other platforms and spaces that COVID-19 will be with us for the foreseeable future. Globally, some countries are now being hit with a 3rd wave of the pandemic. The Bahamas is not immune. As we make slow but steady progress to emerge from the 2nd wave, it will be incumbent upon us all to do what is necessary

to minimize transmission and subsequent new COVID-19 cases.

Mr. Speaker

Yesterday, Aljazeera reported that “daily UK cases alone number in the thousands, as experts say the true figure could be in the tens of thousands.”

The report went on to say that “The number of coronavirus cases globally has now passed 30 million, as the World Health Organisation sounds an alarm over the rising rate of transmission across Europe.”

It concluded that “More than 300,000 people have been infected there in the past week.”¹

Mr. Speaker

Soutik Biswas’ article “*Why India’s Covid problem could be bigger than we think*” sheds light on the dire situation in that country. The article, in part, says that “It took 170 days for India to reach the first million cases. The last million cases took only 11 days.” Average daily cases have shot up from 62 in April to more than 87,000 in

¹ Accessed on <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/09/alarmed-warns-europe-300-000-covid-19-cases-week-200918123051043.html>: 22nd September 2020

September. In the past week, India has recorded more than 90,000 cases and 1,000 deaths every day.²

Mr. Speaker

Most nations have tackled COVID-19 with lockdowns in varied forms. Sweden took the novel approach with no lockdowns. On the other hand, Jamaica, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and some countries in Europe, took the approach with partial lockdowns of cities, provinces, and parishes while Great Britain, Italy, and Spain

² Accessed on <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54176375>: 22nd September 2020

declared national complete lockdowns of their countries.

Mr. Speaker

We in The Bahamas have used complete national lockdowns, as well as island wide lockdowns for example, Bimini in the first wave and Grand Bahama in the second.

The island lockdowns of Grand Bahama and Bimini have demonstrated large success, flattening the curve. Today, Bimini has registered 21 days without a new confirmed case. To the people of Bimini, I say, “Well done!” Grand Bahama, while still registering

very.... very small numbers of new cases has also done well.

Mr Speaker

We are making strides on Islands such as Cat Island, Berry Island, Acklins, Bimini, Mayaguana and Crooked Island which have gone almost two weeks or more with no new reported COVID-19 cases. In fact, Cat Island has gone 42 days, Berry Island 39 days and Acklins 24 days.

I encourage all of our smaller island communities to continue to do all that they can to protect their space through limited

travel, maintaining physical distance, and wearing masks and sanitizing frequently used devices and common spaces.

Mr Speaker

We have seen the vast majority of cases here in New Providence, the largest and most densely populated island of our archipelago. Since our last update we have had 459 new cases, 386 or 84% are on New Providence which continues to be our epicentre. Here, we have seen our health system – particularly our only public tertiary acute care facility overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients who have been more severely ill than in the first

wave. With this scenario, deaths are an unfortunate consequence.

Early in the COVID-19 outbreak, the delicate balance between increasing new cases and the potential for overwhelming the health care system capacity for assessment and treatment of COVID cases was signaled as a concern.

In our last update the challenge with morgue capacity at PMH being exhausted was brought to the nation. Bed capacity in care and assessment units at PMH, inclusive of Accident and Emergency, GPC and Legacy Units are also now at capacity. While

South Beach Clinic is now functioning as a expanded in patient centre with 167 health care workers removed from service due to COVID exposure, as well as increasing fatigue of those remaining on the frontline, all efforts are being taken for augmenting acute care infrastructure along with health care personnel.

Mr. Speaker

On the other hand, New Providence, Abaco and Eleuthera have recorded new cases within the last 24 hours.

- Eleuthera, three (3) cases;

- Abaco by five (5) cases; and
- New Providence forty-one (41) cases.

Mr. Speaker

I have said it in this Place before and it bears repeating. Well ahead of this pandemic, over time and administrations, the human, infrastructural, and technological foundations of our healthcare system required bolstering. We knew that we would be challenged to withstand a severe surge.

Mr. Speaker

One of the strategies to mitigate this challenge, was to institute lockdowns to

break the chains of transmission and control the number of infected people. During this period critical infrastructure upgrades to our tertiary facilities were undertaken to ensure augmented capacity for management of COVID-19 patients.

These include increased acute care bed capacity, increasing our lab testing capacity, and fast-tracked repairs and upgrades to public health facilities, particularly in New Providence and Grand Bahama.

Mr. Speaker

For the COVID-19 response in New Providence, we have

- Expanded the bed capacity in the Legacy Unit of the Princess Margaret Hospital from 4 to 8;
- Repurposed the South Beach Health Centre to serve as a 24-hour urgent care and referral centre with a team of healthcare providers from the Department and the Princess Margaret Hospital to assess and treat patients with symptoms suggestive of COVID as well as admit up to twenty-six (26) mild and moderate cases; and

- Contracted 22 beds at Doctors Hospital West and additional beds at Doctors Hospital East for patients with COVID-19.

In Grand Bahama, there are 16 beds at the Cancer Association of The Bahamas (CAB) building in Freeport and 7 beds at the new Infectious Disease Centre.

Beyond our tertiary considerations, **Mr. Speaker**

We have concentrated our response to bolstering our public health measures while maintaining access to primary health

services, urgent and emergency medical services, and mental health services at facilities in New Providence and the Family Islands. We continue home care services, including follow up mothers and their infants post-delivery.

Mr. Speaker

More than 20 patients suspected of having COVID-19 were air lifted to New Providence from the Family Islands. We have taken the decision, with the improved situation in Grand Bahama, to transport suspected cases from the islands of Bimini and Abaco and

their cays to Grand Bahama for emergency services.

Mr Speaker,

We have improved access to COVID screening for suspected cases at all main clinics and the Family Islands, with South Beach Health Centre being the lead facility in New Providence.

Over the past 6 months, we have sustained access to all primary health care clinics in New Providence and at least 56 main health care centres among the Family Islands,

closing temporarily only when high rise cleaning and sanitisation is needed.

Mr. Speaker

We have expanded service hours of the Elizabeth Estates, Fleming Street and Flamingo Gardens Clinics from 9am to 9pm to discourage traffic to the Princess Margaret Hospital and opened Flamingo Gardens Clinic on Saturdays between the hours of 9am to 5pm.

Mr. Speaker

Despite the human resources challenges, the Department of Public Health continues to

reassign its health human resources to strengthen the Disease Surveillance and Contact Tracing Units.

Mr. Speaker

Case confirmation of any infectious disease outbreak is hinged to laboratory testing capacity. As of yesterday, a total of 17,341 tests have been completed in country.

We have made significant strides in this area, having resourced the National Reference Laboratory to revert the testing turnaround time to 24 – 48 hours from sample receipt.

We have adequate supplies of RTPCR test kits, RNA extractor kits and reagents required for testing; and additional molecular testing modalities are being deployed in the acute care environments of PMH in New Providence and Rand Memorial Hospital in Grand Bahama.

Our testing protocol has expanded with testing priorities clearly articulated to maximise use of scarce resources. All avenues for procurement of additional kits and reagents are being explored recognising the existing global challenge. We are also

benefitting from private sector laboratory capacities which have now come on stream.

Currently, there are 2 GeneXpert machines and 1 Panther Fusion System being used at the Princess Margaret Hospital to provide diagnostic RT-PCR testing for the COVID-19 virus. The Panther Fusion System produces faster results than the GeneXpert machine.

Mr. Speaker

We are also looking at new technology for testing. Recently, the US Food and Drug Administration authorised a low-cost and

non-invasive saliva-based polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test for COVID-19 that retains much of the accuracy of traditional nasal swabbing. We are now testing its efficacy for use in The Bahamas.

Mr. Speaker

My Ministry supports extending the Emergency Order to continue the implementation of our well-coordinated, predictable and transparent approach to this new normal with the protection of public health as a priority.

We acknowledge that we must avoid further disruption of our already fragile economy and additional uncertainty for our constituents, who have made huge sacrifices.

Mr. Speaker

The economy will therefore have to be restarted while COVID-19 is still an active and immediate threat. We therefore support smart targeted containment coupled with economic restart to curtail human and economic losses.

Mr. Speaker, again

I support the extension of this Emergency Order for our healthcare workers, who need us to once again be patient and cooperative to save the lives of our loved ones and themselves.

Mr. Speaker

I have said it before, and it is important enough to say it again. Our decisions for and on behalf of the Bahamian people are not arbitrary nor unweighted. Our constituents' safety, welfare, and well-being are primary considerations for public health and our economy.

Mr. Speaker

We will continue to effectively respond to COVID-19 by promoting public health and safety, encouraging community participation, social mobilisation and peer responsibility which is holding each other accountable. All of us want to see the back of COVID-19. In this environment we must not lose hope. With all that we do we ask that Jehovah Rapha, the Lord our healer would hasten the healing of our world and in particular our nation.

Mr. Speaker

We are in the ‘new normal’. Getting back to business requires physical distancing measures, minimising person-to-person contact, wearing masks, washing our hands frequently, and ensuring that frequently touched surfaces are disinfected regularly.

Mr. Speaker

Based on the public’s cooperation thus far, I am still of the view that we have large consent to move ahead.

Mr. Speaker

I am, therefore, pleased to second the motion put by the Member for Killarney, the Most Honourable Prime Minister.

In all things, **Mr. Speaker**, may the name of Yahweh be praised. And may Yahweh Elohim continue to bless our work and the people of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas.

Thank you.