



**House of Assembly Notes
Resolution Extending Emergency Powers
Orders**

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

**Wednesday, 23 September 2020
Nassau, Bahamas**

Mr. Speaker:

At the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, this deadly and very contagious virus was designated as a novel coronavirus.

This means it was a new virus, a virus the world had not seen before.

Such a novel or new virus meant that the peoples of the world, medical professionals and scientists, and governments and countries had to learn as quickly as possible as much as possible about this very dangerous virus.

We had to learn about how it is transmitted.

We had to learn about how deadly and contagious it is and who are the most vulnerable.

We had to learn how to diagnose and to treat those infected by the virus.

And the world began a massive and unprecedented global effort to create an effective vaccine, an effort that is ongoing.

We had to look back in history at past pandemics to see how to respond to COVID-19.

We also had to look to new technologies and ideas, such as advanced contact tracing and modern diagnostics, to respond to a virus that spread around the world in

approximately 100 days because of modern aviation and other modes of travel.

Though it has seemed like an eternity, the world has been in this pandemic for slightly less than a year.

We are still learning about this virus and its long-term health effects.

At the beginning of the pandemic, most governments imposed similar measures such as mask wearing, curfews, lockdowns, contact tracing and physical distancing measures to limit the spread of the virus.

Our first priority, my first priority and obligation, was to save lives and to protect our people, and that has not changed.

This is why we acted quickly and aggressively at the very beginning, even though we were very heavily criticized by some in this chamber for our initial emergency orders and actions.

Some of these critics said that the orders were unnecessary and too strong.

Some in this chamber were slow to appreciate the dangers posed by this virus and the emergency measures that were needed.

Though they have been proven wrong over and over again, they have yet to acknowledge that we did what was right and timely in order to save lives.

I once again offer condolences to the families of those who have lost loved ones.

Let us continue to pray for the recovery of those in hospital or at home, who are still struggling with COVID-19, including those with long-term health effects.

Mr. Speaker:

I am pleased that The Bahamas was among the first countries in the world to require the wearing of masks, though even then, there were those who said we were unnecessarily restricting certain freedoms and who appeared to play down the severity of the looming pandemic.

Thankfully, the vast majority of Bahamians understood the need to care for themselves and for one another by adopting various lifesaving measures.

Most Bahamians understood the need to be their brother's and sister's keepers.

They knew the diseases and its deadly effects were not partisan and did not wear political colors.

I again offer fulsome praise for all of those in our country who responded quickly and with a spirit of national unity, including those who put aside partisanship and reached for a higher national good and shared purpose.

Mr. Speaker:

I am truly grateful that my training and years of experience as a medical doctor, helped me to appreciate the danger of this virus at the very beginning of the pandemic.

I also realized as prime minister that the country needed to continue to find a balance between the health, economic and social needs of our people.

We knew it would not be easy finding such a balance, but that with the cooperation of as many Bahamians and residents as possible, we could confront this virus, better, together.

This is the same search for balance that countries around the world continue to struggle with and will continue to struggle with for some time to come.

It is a constant and ongoing balancing act.

Mr. Speaker:

Over the past seven months:

- We boosted our health care infrastructure to better respond to the virus;

- We improved national testing;

- We improved contact tracing;

- We revised emergency orders as necessary;

Bahamian people;

- We provided unprecedented financial, economic and social assistance, especially to the most vulnerable;

- We are feeding tens of thousands of Bahamians who hit hard times due to the economic effects of the pandemic, with the Government now spending approximately \$1.3 million dollars every week;

- We consulted widely with many stakeholders and the broader public; and

- We provided specific plans in a number of areas related to the virus, including phased plans for the reopening of the economy and the upcoming plans from the Economic Recovery Committee.

When we erred and made mistakes, we acknowledged them; we listened; we did better and we pledge to continue to do better.

We are in this fight, together.

Today, in our Caribbean and North American neighbors, throughout the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa, and even in countries that have been acknowledged to have had generally the best responses to the pandemic – the pandemic still requires various emergency orders.

Indeed, many are currently battling new waves, with some returning to national lockdowns.

Nearly one million people have died, and no one knows when the pandemic will end.

Few countries in the world no longer require some type of emergency orders and restrictions.

I rise today in support of today's Resolution, extending various emergency orders until the 31st day of October 2020.

The measures in the Emergency Powers Orders are not ends in themselves.

They are tools or measures used to protect and to save lives and are available in case of an emergency, as a number of health professionals have noted publicly over the past few days.

Today, I also wish to note a number of changes to various emergency measures.

Mr. Speaker:

Because our nation is an archipelago with varying circumstances, we sought to modulate the various measures depending on the specific circumstances in each of our family of islands.

This is why we created various Schedules of Islands.

I am pleased to announce today that commercial and additional social activities may resume as normal on the following islands: Andros, Acklins, Berry Islands, Bimini, Cat Island, Crooked Island, Eleuthera, Exuma, Grand Bahama, Inagua and Mayaguana, with physical distancing and mask wearing protocols in place.

These islands join Chub Cay, Harbour Island, Long Cay, Long Island, Ragged Island, Rum Cay, San Salvador and Spanish Wells in the First Schedule of Islands.

While a curfew will no longer be in effect for these islands, health officials recommend that a 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew remain in effect for Grand Bahama.

Health officials also recommend that beaches remain open daily on Grand Bahama, from 5 a.m. to 12 noon for the time being.

Because of the number of cases on New Providence, the provisions under the current Emergency Powers Order will remain in place.

Further, because of the performance of indicators being tracked by health officials, the provisions under the current Emergency Powers Order will also remain in place for Abaco at this time.

However, on Abaco, beaches may now open daily between 5 a.m. and 10 p.m.

Weddings on all islands in the country may be held in a religious facility following protocols and Ministry of Health approved guidelines currently in place for church services.

For Abaco and New Providence, wedding receptions may be held outdoors only with physical distancing and mask wearing protocols.

On all other islands, wedding receptions may be held indoors and outdoors with physical distancing and mask wearing protocols.

On all islands including Abaco and New Providence, funerals may be held in a religious facility following protocols and Ministry of Health approved guidelines currently in place for church services.

For Abaco and New Providence, graveside services and/or internment may be held with 10 people in attendance, not including officiant and mortuary workers. Repasts are not permitted for Abaco and New Providence.

On all other islands, graveside services and/or internment may be held with 30 people in attendance. Repasts may be held with no more than 20 in attendance.

On all islands, gyms are permitted to open, subject to protocols and guidelines approved by the Ministry of Health.

Facilities will be inspected periodically by health officials.

Mr. Speaker:

We remain committed to the re-opening of the economy in the area of tourism by mid-October, with the necessary protocols that must be put in place.

Tourism will provide another update soon.

Tourism officials, in the public and private sectors, have been working very hard over many months to devise plans for a phased reopening.

It is unfortunate, unduly harsh and unfair to criticize the staff of the Ministry of Tourism for having no plans.

This is disingenuous, untrue, unhelpful, and unfortunate.

If one has any advice or constructive criticism for the hardworking staff of the Ministry of Tourism and Aviation and other stakeholders involved in creating plans for reopening, such help would be welcome.

But it is deeply disappointing when some people launch unfounded and unfair criticism of those trying hard to launch the reopening of tourism. I salute them for their efforts.

Let us give them our help and encouragement, not broad condemnation.

I will have more to say about tourism in an upcoming national address on the economy.

No one should be under any illusion as to how long and how difficult it will be to restore our economy generally and tourism, specifically.

Recovering, stronger, together, is going to take a long time.

But, I assure the Bahamian people, that we are preparing the groundwork for recovery.

This week, I will receive an initial report from the Economic Recovery Committee, which I will also report on in the weeks ahead.

I also assure the Bahamian people that we will act boldly and will offer plans for structural reform that will transform, diversify and modernize our Bahamas into a 21st Century economy that will seize the future and will be a model for our region.

Mr. Speaker:

2020 has not been the year any of us imagined.

The COVID-19 pandemic put on hold so many of the hopes, dreams and aspirations of our people, including young Bahamians.

Children's educations have been disrupted.

Many businesses, including small businesses, are still struggling.

We have spent months barely seeing our friends and relatives out of fear of catching or spreading the virus.

Vaccines are in development, but when they will be ready, and when they will be deployed comprehensively around the world is unknown.

This pandemic is the most significant national emergency in our modern history.

Bahamians have died.

Bahamians are sick.

There are also those who have long-term health effects, some of which may last for many years or a lifetime.

There are people who had the virus some time ago and supposedly recovered, yet they still suffer debilitating and lingering effects.

No one knows how long these effects will last.

Many are suffering.

Our forefathers wisely saw there would be times like these when our nation would be put to the test.

They entrusted in the Governor General the lawful power to declare Proclamations of Emergency.

They knew that in an all-out crisis, swift and decisive action would be needed to save Bahamian lives.

We are here to extend those lawful Emergency Powers because we are still in an emergency.

We live in an emergency due to the pandemic.

This is the first time in our modern history that our Government has had to fully mobilize to face a crisis of this nature affecting the entire Bahamas simultaneously.

All resources are being brought to bear in our hospitals to treat the sick.

We are providing historic and unprecedented amounts of unemployment benefits and assistance to individuals and businesses.

Mr. Speaker:

There are people who oppose my Government for various reasons. That is their right. This is a democracy.

However, it is unreasonable for any critic to say this is not an emergency and these powers are not necessary.

That argument is simply wrong.

One cannot say that we do not need certain emergency orders and at the same time say that the virus remains very serious.

Saying both of these at the same time is wholly contradictory and makes no sense.

The Emergency Powers Orders give the Government the necessary ability to act quickly to prevent or lessen virus spread.

The provisions in the Emergency Powers Orders have been prescribed as narrowly as possible.

No activity by citizens and residents is prohibited or constrained, unless required for public health and safety purposes.

Our health team surveys the circumstance, analyzes the data and makes recommendations to combat the virus based on the situation at hand.

We take that advice and use the Emergency Powers to help save lives.

Without the Emergency Powers the virus would run wild in our communities, killing a large number of people in record time.

That is how serious this crisis is.

That is how infectious and deadly the virus is.

Mr. Speaker:

My Government does not like lockdowns.

We understand they are hard on family life; they're hard on businesses, and individual's finances; they're hard on people's mental health.

When virus cases increase we try first to impose other restrictive measures.

But, if cases rise exponentially and virus spread is out of control, we may have no choice but to order a lockdown to

save lives, as have most governments around the world, including countries that have been acknowledged to have had generally a good response to the pandemic.

Thankfully, based on the data at hand, we appear to be nearing the end of our second wave of the pandemic.

But let me be clear: The second wave is not over.

Additionally, given global trends, we will likely face a third wave.

The emergency is not over.

I thank our hardworking medical team for all they have done to help reduce the numbers over these recent months.

I also thank the Bahamian people for their compliance and cooperation with the public health guidelines.

While there are some who ignore the measures, the large majority of Bahamians and residents are abiding by the measures.

They have worn their masks.

They have tried to stay physically distant.

They have kept their hands sanitized and away from their faces.

Until there is a vaccine or treatment, these are still the best measures to keep Bahamians and their families safe.

As I have said, the pandemic is far from over.

In fact, it is likely there will be a third wave in The Bahamas, as there has been and will be in other countries.

We know this from the pattern of the spread of the virus.

It is very contagious.

As people travel more outside of their homes, congregate and let their guards down when one wave ends, the virus comes back.

So, we must guard against complacency.

We must not let our guards down.

As a people we must do all we can to lessen the impact of a third wave.

Key to this is that each of us and all of us must be even more committed to using the measures we used to slow the first and second waves.

The more we consistently comply with these recommendations, the better we may control a third wave.

By limiting the number of people infected in the third wave, we lessen the need to impose the most restrictive measures such as lockdowns.

Fighting COVID-19 is a national effort.

We have to work together.

Each and every Bahamian and resident is key to our success.

It only takes one infected person going to a gathering and not following the guidelines to cause hundreds of infections.

Let history remember us as one of the disciplined nations in this pandemic.

Let us be remembered as a people who worked together toward the common goal of keeping our communities as COVID-free as possible.

Continued national commitment to that common goal and common good will save lives and lessen suffering.

Mr. Speaker:

Let me close by again thanking our medical and health experts for their unwavering dedication, national spirit and love of country.

I also again thank Dr. Merceline Dahl Regis, who deserves the highest praise and high national recognition for her tireless efforts on behalf of us all.

She is a symbol and example of the best of the Bahamian spirit. She has remained steadfast and dedicated to the greater good and the common good.

I am sure the House will join me in acknowledging the good work of Dr. Dahl Regis and our health experts.

There are so many fine examples of this spirit of resilience, determination and national loyalty, which will bring us to a better day.

But for now let us stay resolved and let us stay strong in the fight against this deadly virus.

Let us stay strong in our determined efforts to reopen our country in order to restore lives and livelihoods.

I support the extension of the Emergency Powers Orders and ask God's blessings on our Bahamas.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.
