

# **PREMIER'S REMARKS: Ministerial Statement on the Phased Re-Opening of the TCI - 29 May 2020**

THE OFFICE OF THE PREMIER - TURKS AND CAICOS ISLANDS · FRIDAY, MAY 29, 2020 · 22 MINUTES

Good Morning Mr. Speaker, Hon Colleagues, Turks and Caicos Islands

We are indeed in uncertain times and times for which there is no play book and where lives truly must matter. Over the past nine (9) weeks of major change beginning with the closure of our Borders on March 24th which impacted the Hospitality Sector and a mandatory curfew and shelter in place law which saw the closure of the local economy except for activities and businesses deemed to be offering essential services.

This time, Mr. Speaker, as I have stated in each major address over the weeks what these measures have done was allowed us to flattened the curve meaning: slowing its spread and therefore allowing us time to build critical medical capacity by securing additional manpower, in country testing abilities, the procuring of critical equipment, the critical infrastructural upgrades to the hospital and the procurement of critical personal protective equipment (PPEs). As a country we are in a much better place today and are able within a few short weeks to respond to an outbreak should it happen.

As promised on May 20th during my last national address, I am presenting the remaining phases for the phased reopening of the country.

## **COVID 19 DASHBOARD**

The COVID-19 Dashboard revealed yesterday that there remains two suspected cases and no new cases for more than two weeks. While we are grateful, we continue to caution persons not to become complacent given the news that we are COVID free in TCI. I do believe that the virus remains in Turks and Caicos Islands and we must remember that there can be persons who are positive and show no symptoms. This is why wider testing is important and recommended in a national testing strategy.

Mr. Speaker over the past weeks, I have been providing regular updates to the people of the Turks and Caicos Islands on major development and decisions of Cabinet. Today is by far the most impactful report of all and I am pleased to report that we are at this place following the meeting of May 20th and May 27th when important decisions taken.

## **EXPRESSIONS OF THANKS**

Mr. Speaker, I would start by extending gratitude to our Almighty God for his protection and all our essential officers including our Civil Servants, healthcare professionals, Police Officers, Security Guards, Cleaners, Social Service Professionals, Fire Fighters, Port Workers, Shipping and Courier Services, Communications, Fuel Providers, Store Attenders, Sanitation Workers and all who played an imperative role on our road to recovery. All of you have made sacrifices and exceeded the call of duty. Your families too have stood by your side, supporting you. I must also thank our Turks and Caicos Islanders and residents for their patience and adherence to the law. To all of you, I want to say thank you. Mr. Speaker, these are unprecedented times, therefore we must remain vigilant in our fight against this horrendous pandemic. Mr. Speaker we are physically distant today, but we must stand together – together in our fight against this COVID-19 pandemic. Mr. Speaker, the virus is a tough enemy – invisible, but formidable. It is now our turn to prove that we are worthy of our forebears, and up to the challenge before us. I

have every confidence that we will prove more than equal to the task. We have proven throughout the years that we are indeed a resilient people; and Mr. Speaker, when we build back, we build back not only bigger, but better. We are a blessed country and Mr. Speaker we will recover and our country will be better than it has ever been. My Government remains resolute in our commitment to open back up the

economy, but we must continue to do so responsibly.

## **PHASES 2 – 4 OF THE REOPENING OF TCI ANNOUNCED**

As such, Mr. Speaker, Cabinet in our last two meetings of May 20th and May 27th reviewed and endorsed a draft strategy for the phased reopening of the Turks and Caicos Islands. I would have reported in my national address that the final phases were being agreed and that a date for the reopening of the borders will be announced by June 1st which is the end of the regulations currently in place.

Cabinet has agreed the following and in doing so has balanced the need to protect lives and livelihoods. I wish to assure the people of this country that health gains remain central to the focus, and the recommendations were guided by the Ministry of Health. The Minister also assured the Cabinet that advice of the Public Environmental Health Board was sought and received and we are so guided.

I wish to announce first and foremost that Cabinet has agreed the continued use of Emergency Powers and for a nation-wide curfew to remain in place until June 22nd. This curfew will begin now from 10pm on June 1st to 5am on June 22nd.

I will now outline a four-phased approach which summarizes areas to be addressed with certain overarching public health measures which will need to be maintained into the foreseeable future in order to reduce the risk of spread. Residents will recall that Phase 1A and Phase 1B commenced on May 4th and May 11th respectively.

Mr. Speaker, Government will move into the second phased of its reopening as follows:

### **2A; (*June 5-June 22, 2020*)**

- Extending of retail businesses to reopen; must strictly adhere to Standard operating protocols for retail business issued by the Ministry of Health (see attached protocols).
- Church services, weddings, funerals, burial grounds, and social gatherings to have 10 attendees, with proper attendance logs to be kept, outdoor and “drive in” options being encouraged, while ensuring that social distancing and face covering are adhered to, persons must remain in their vehicles during the conducting of the services. The limit of 10 attendees is for building capacity.
- Real Estate property showing, adhering to standard operating procedures issued by the Ministry of Health.
- Non-contact and non-team sports, personal sport/fitness training, to be allowed; A non-contact is a sport in which the players are physically separated such as to make it nearly impossible for them to make physical contact during the course of a game.

- Licensed daycare centers and child home carers. Licensed daycare centers must strictly adhere to standard operating protocols for daycare and child care services issued by the Ministry of Health before opening/ with daycare services being subject to strict enforcement.
- Personal service businesses on appointment only, e.g. Barbers and Hair Salons; Must strictly adhere to standard operating protocols for barbers and salons issued by the Ministry of Health.
- Sunday business closures remain to the same however recreational activities would be permitted.
- Visitation to facilities such as Her Majesty's Prison, the Detention Center, Children's Home and wellness centers should remain restricted unless deemed necessary. Any visitation should be undertaken with extreme caution and utilisation of strict social distancing, hygiene measures and use of PPE such as masks.

### **2B; (June 22- July 6, 2020)**

- Essential travel be allowed for residents ordinarily residing in family islands outside of Providenciales to be allowed to travel, and allow to return, with proper travel logs being maintained by the proprietor of the mode of transmission, and individuals adhering to social distancing.
- Church services, weddings, funerals, burial grounds, and social gatherings to have 25 attendees, with proper attendance logs to be kept for formal gatherings, outdoor and "drive-in" options being encouraged, while ensuring that social distancing and face covering are adhered to, persons must remain in their vehicles during the conducting of the services. The limit of 10 attendees is for building capacity.
- Extension of Emergency Powers and curfew to 21 June 2020.
- Continued phased re-opening of the Civil Service, managed by the Deputy Governor. Continued phased re-opening of Statutory Bodies, managed by their respective boards and management teams.
- Sunday business closures remain the same however recreational activities would be permitted.
- Visitation to facilities such as Her Majesty's Prison, the Detention Center, Children's Home and wellness centers should remain restricted unless deemed necessary. Any visitation should be undertaken with extreme caution and utilisation of strict social distancing, hygiene measures and use of PPE such as masks.

### **Phase 3 (July 6- July 22, 2020)**

Full re-opening of local Economy; all businesses and activities adhering to established protocols.

- Hotels and Churches.
- Sporting events and contact sports.
- Dine in restaurants.
- Casinos, Bars, and Discos.

- Gyms, Spas, and Fitness Centers.
- Domestic Travel-gradual reintroduction.
- Visitation to facilities such as Her Majesty's Prison, the Detention Center, Children's Home and wellness centers should remain restricted unless deemed necessary. Any visitation should be undertaken with extreme caution and utilisation of strict social distancing, hygiene measures and use of PPE such as masks.
- Social distancing of 6 feet between persons, enhanced hygiene measures such as frequent handwashing and cleaning as well as use of face coverings in public spaces will be required during all phases.

#### **Phase 4 (July 22, 2020)**

- Reopening of Regional and International Borders.
- Visitation to facilities such as Her Majesty's Prison, the Detention Center, Children's Home and wellness centers should remain restricted unless deemed necessary, until December 31, 2020. Any visitation should be undertaken with extreme caution and utilisation of strict social distancing, hygiene measures and use of PPE such as masks.
- Social distancing of 6 feet between persons, enhanced hygiene measures such as frequent handwashing and cleaning as well as use of face coverings in public spaces will be required during all phases, until December 31,2020. This will be kept under review by the Ministry of Health however it is anticipated that these measures will be required for the foreseeable future and will become the new normal. Enforcement of these measures will require enforcement by the Environmental Health Department along with relevant powers to do so under the Public and Environmental Health Ordinance.

Mr. Speaker, assessments will be carried out at the end of each Phase in order to determine whether it is safe and adequate measures are in place before consideration/recommendations can be made to move to the next phase. We reserve the right to roll back as well if there are indicators saying that it should be.

In order to do an assessment to evaluate the impact on the community of COVID-19. The assessments will take into consideration by my Government:

- a. Number of hospitalisations and number of available Beds.
- b. Empirical analysis of results of testing key workers and other groups.
- c. Percentages of increase of community spread.

These provisions will be included in regulations and the following will also be included in these regulations:

- The mandatory wearing of mask/face covering.
- Work remotely from home should remain where possible and should remain until the last phase.
- Business times – blanket closure of all business at 8p.m.

- Small business-remove restriction of four persons at a time and allow the businesses to determine the capacity but ensuring the social distancing is maintained.
- Sunday closure of businesses will remain.
- The closure of the Cruise Port is extended to August 31, 2020 and its re-opening remains subjected to guidance from the CDC, Cruise Industry and the Ministry of Health.
- The power to order self isolation, to shelter in place, for screening and the duty to provide information will all remain in place.
- Likewise, the application to Justice of the Peace, the authority to apprehend, physical distancing protocols.
- Schools will remain closed until 26 June and will break for summer on this day.
- The social gathering ban will be lifted and a restriction of 10 persons in phase 2 a and 25 in phase 2b will be imposed.
- Attendances at weddings will continue to be restricted to 10 persons in phase 2a and 25 in phase 2b
- The restriction of domestic travel will be relaxed under the Ministry of Health's guidelines
- Activities on public beaches remain restricted to 10 persons practicing social distances and no alcohol should be permitted.
- Power to requisition any building, ship or aircraft and to requisition essential services are both extended to 21 June 2020.
- The power to stop, detain and arrest and well as the penalty for spreading false information remains in place.

### ***Increase in Medical Capacity***

Mr. Speaker, we are pleased that there is in country testing and that an amended national testing strategy will soon be completed and announced which will include the use of multiple PCR Machines procured and the critical role of private sector. We are equally happy to report the impending arrival of Cuban medical personnel within the next two weeks and the critical hospital upgrade works to commence next week. These gains are important as we reopen the local economy and then our borders.

### ***Returning TC Islanders***

I am also pleased to report that under the regulations passed a few weeks ago, TC Islanders continue to return home. So far TC Islanders have arrived and would be arriving imminently from Barbados, Dominican Republic, USA, Jamaica and Columbia and they have been and will be accommodated in a Government funded quarantine facility or directed by the Chief Medical Officer.

### **STIMULUS PROGRAM UPDATES**

A number of initiatives were announced as a part of the Government's COVID-19 Stimulus Program and I offer a brief report on the update on three initiatives under the program: the

Stimulus Employee Grant and the HRTT waiver which closed last week. And I wish to provide an update on the Coronavirus Business Assistance Program in train and to close in another 17 days.

### **COVID-19 EMPLOYEE STIMULUS PACKAGE**

You were advised that the EMPLOYEE submissions would cease on May 25, 2020 at 4:00p.m. This was done after the database activity for submissions for the last two weeks have wanted. And it was felt that persons wanting to apply would have already submitted; but we still needed to give notice. It is important to note that if any applicant has applied before and got a reference number, they should not apply again. You must be tired of hearing me talking about the duplications but it is a necessary evil. If there is something wrong, someone from the Compliance Team will contact the individual. I asked the Team to explain for my benefit how the Compliance and Declined features work in the database. From what I understand, this is the process:

- The Compliance officer is assigned an application automatically.
- The comments from the previous reviewers are listed for the compliance officer to review prior to looking over the issued application.
- The officer reviews the application and the supporting documents to determine whether to "approve", "decline" or "notify applicant".
- With any selection, an automatic email is sent to the applicant to the address provided when they submitted the application to advise him/her of what is needed.
- That application remains on hold until the officer has completed the processing of it.
- The applicant will respond by uploading missing documents in a path created within the email. As soon as the missing/required documents are received, the compliance officer is alerted to check the folder.
- If upon checking, the document folder is complete, the application is approved for payment.
- The applicant in the case of being declined will be given reason, if approved it will progress to Finance for payment and if the applicant is notified they would receive in the email requesting any outstanding documents to be uploaded to the link that is provided in the email.
- To be clear, an application initially sent to compliance or declined must be reviewed before a FINAL DECISION.

At times the compliance officer may call the applicant directly to nudge them that the response is in the email or to check their spam inboxes. I know that persons are now impatient about getting this benefit, and may even be frustrated but I ask that you respond quickly and that you are cordial in any interactions with the team. They are there to assist you through to payment process.

### ***Employee Stimulus Payments***

Mr. Speaker I would want at this time to update this Honourable House on the progress that has been made in disbursing the employee benefits under the COVID-19 Stimulus Program.



The database has registered 4610 approvals for payments as of 6:00p.m. on Thursday, May 28, 2020; this represents \$5.5m. however, of that over 4000 dispersed. The Compliance Folder has approximately 1,900 files, 750 of which are being actively managed and another 1,150 is yet to be cleared. The Ministry has doubled the complement of personnel in the Compliance Tier to 30 to ensure that the folder is cleared quickly and that you receive the much need money without further delay. Mr. Speaker, those are the files, that are close to being approved but may need one document to progress it to the approved status. The Compliance Tier has been contacting persons over the last week via emails and for those who have been contacted already, we encourage you to respond to them as quickly as possible. If you do not respond, we have asked the team to call applicants within two (2) hours of originating the email contact.

From the various press releases, you will have a general idea of what you did and did not include in your submission. So do not wait until you get a call to start to put your documentation together. Create your file and have it prepared for when the email is sent out. It will take no more than 5 minutes to upload the excluded records into your file and as soon as you do so, the officer will see that you have added something and can approve your submission, or notify you otherwise.

The Government has learnt that quite a number of citizens do not have their status cards for one or more reasons. Government is keen to get this much needed relief to you and Cabinet has agreed that in the place of a status card, an applicant can use one of two options, to provide:

1) a copy of his passport plus a copy of the birth certificate of one TC Islander parent.

Or

2) a copy of his birth certificate plus a copy of the birth certificate of one or both TC Islander parents.

In addition, Cabinet has agreed, that for the purpose of processing the benefit, officers as part of the processing procedures can accept an expired passport, if presented, along with a birth certificate of the applicant's TC Islander parents. We have also asked that the processors utilize the Immigration database, in the extreme cases where an applicant cannot supply a status card or meet the fill requirement of the options. Government employees assigned to this program are working really hard to ensure that the payments are made. Cabinet's recent decision to accept multiple alternative to proving status is an indication of the whole of Government's commitment to deliver this program.

The database now registers 13,740 submissions. As perplexing as it was to find out that there were over 2,200 files submitted between Friday and Monday last; of which 1,800 are possible duplicates, we understand that you took a chance to resubmit. Yes, the dreaded duplicates again; but they will be reviewed along with those documents that received a first level decline and those in compliance.

The Government, has every intention to utilize, the funds allocated for this benefit and as announced several times is considering a second tranche of assistance for other sectors impacted.

**HRTT WAIVER**

As part of the COVID-19 relief efforts, Mr. Speaker during April 2020 this Government granted a waiver on Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Tax collected during March 2020, which was due to be remitted in April 2020. Under the regulations a relief was provided for the following:

- Accommodation Tax
- Restaurant Tax
- Tourism Services Tax

In order to be considered for the waiver of tax, the taxpayer was asked to submit an application to the Permanent Secretary of Finance together with the following—

- (a) proof that a remittance of tax was made during February 2020; and
- (b) proof of the number of its employees currently on full pay, terminated or on reduced hours.

The application along with the stipulated documentation was required to be submitted on or before 4pm on 25th May 2020.

Mr. Speaker a total of 251 waiver applications were received. Of which, 147 waivers totaling \$2.2m were approved.

## **CORONAVIRUS BUSINESS ASSISTANCE GRANT**

The Government is poised to deliver on its commitment to provide financial assistance to the small business community. The processing of applications received under the Coronavirus Business Assistance Grant will therefore start during the week commencing 1st June 2020.

Originally we had anticipated an uptake of 3800 self-employed and MSMEs. However, thus far TCIG has received 1,050 applications under the Coronavirus Business Assistance Grant. Of the 1,050 applications received, 317 are self-employed persons and 733 are small businesses. Self-employed persons and small businesses in every sector are encouraged to visit [www.gov.tc/trade/stimulus](http://www.gov.tc/trade/stimulus) to peruse the application notes and complete an online application form. Self-employed persons and small businesses who erroneously applied to receive funding under the Employee Stimulus Program are specifically encouraged to submit an online application under the Coronavirus Business Assistance Grant. This grant program remains open to applications from eligible self-employed persons and small businesses until 15th June 2020.

## **UPDATE ON THE ECONOMY**

### ***Government Losses***

Mr Speaker, I announced to the country last week and wish to restate here that the past six (6) weeks had seen a loss to TCIG's coffers of \$26m and the loss projected each month TCIG is proposed to lose \$22m a month with the closed economy and closed borders.

We are reviewing COVID-19 Related Budget Submissions which stand now at \$17m and climbing. As a result of the Fiscal Management Strategy announced, the Ministry of Finance is monitoring closely revenues and expenditures and undertake to introduce a number of measures to manage the delicate financial state soon which will include a full review of the Budget by the end of the first quarter.

### ***Unemployment Numbers***



Mr. Speaker despite the widespread statements that persons have lost their jobs, we do not see these reflected in registration by unemployed persons with Labour Department and I wish to appeal to our people to register so that we can be measured and appropriate in our response. The Labour Department has reached out to businesses and have also had businesses reach out to it to advise of the number of persons laid off. Presently, there are a total of 152 persons confirmed to be unemployed by way of employer submissions. The breakdown is as follows:

1. Belongers 84
2. Residence Permit 3
3. Permanent Residence 1
4. Freelance Permit 4
5. Jamaicans 16
6. Sri Lankans 14
7. Haitians 11
8. Dominicans 11
9. Canadians 4
10. Nepalese 3
11. British 1

Mr. Speaker, so far a total of eighty-four (84) Turks and Caicos Islanders have been laid off and a total of sixty-three (63) expatriates have also been laid off. These numbers have been attained through employer's submissions. The Ministry of Immigration expect this number to change once information is received from the several businesses, who are currently holding discussions with staff. I use this opportunity to appeal to TC Islanders who have lost their jobs to register with the Labour Department. Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Immigration has made available contact information to register in the form of email, hotline numbers as well as office drop in.

## **CONCLUSION**

Mr. Speaker we recognize that people are hurting and the state of uncertainty has taken a toll on many minds. Whilst I believe to a degree some kind of certainty given with the announcement of dates may help to ease anxieties, we recognize the difficulty to meet basic needs for many.

It is regrettable that in this climate people continue to play with people's lives and minds. The weight on my Government and the health care professionals to make life saving decisions even in the face of criticism and reckless behavior demanding re-opening and such the like is a heavy one but an easier decision than most know. Because my Government maintains that lives matter, your health matter more and my Government cannot apologize for this because it remains the right decision.

Mr. Speaker, my Government has provided a \$15m grant program for the largest sector that was impacted by our early closure of the border and further impact by the latest sector to open. I have committed over nearly every major update to provide further support to those businesses

and individuals whose businesses are outside the hospitality or hospitality services sector following our mandatory closure.

Mr. Speaker, we also recognize the even greater need to provide humanitarian assistance beyond the Social Enhancement Aide Stimulus Program under the Social Services Department and in the coming week, you will learn more of an expanded Government funded program jointly offered by the Ministry with responsibility for Social Services and the Ministry of Finance. I am asking on behalf of the Hon Minister of Education and I for volunteers to position themselves to come forward. While we will target the churches and NGOs in search of volunteers, we will invite individuals to help in the distribution efforts once ready.

Mr. Speaker this country and its people have sacrificed a lot of their freedoms to remain healthy and alive and I end with the same words I did on Wednesday of last week as I am confident of its truth and am definitely certain that we must reassure our people in these uncertain times.

While some people have lost focus as to why we are doing what we doing and why we sacrificed as we did for the past due to the pressures of special interests or personal pressures, we cannot dwell on them. Our lives still depend on the conscientious and responsible actions of all of us.

There is NO play book and few things we are certain of and for certain Mr. Speaker we know that this virus is highly contagious and deadly. I remain concern about the more vulnerable of; our elderly and the huge population among us that have underlying conditions be it hypertension, diabetes, asthma or other respiratory illnesses, heart disease, renal failure and we know we have a large number. This is why we must be cautious not only because of how fast our hospitals can become overwhelmed but because every life is precious.

Mr. Speaker, today I encourage the people of this country to not lose hope. Do not think that you are being punished or that your Government does not care. For now, 15 million reasons that say other-wise. And even in the face of rapidly falling revenues, rising healthcare and COVID-19 related expenditure and the need to continue to fund critical services, your Government continues to find new ways to assist and have heard your cries.

What TCI has not seen is more generosity from businesses who can donate or greater acts of philanthropy. It is so important in this time to help a country that has helped you and to be a blessing when you are blessed. We must awaken hearts of compassion and we must recognize that no Government anywhere can meet all the needs of all its people in these times.

I say to those businesses and individuals who have loss and are facing grave uncertainty and who are becoming frustrated more and more, I say to you that your Government is not trying to kill you but simply trying to save your life and we are hopeful that we will get through this together and come out stronger for it.

Mr Speaker, I end as I did on Wednesday of last week as I am confident that the decisions taken early in the onset of this virus has saved lives and I am even more certain of the need to keep lives at the forefront of decisions and the need to not lose the gains made because of the great sacrifices of our people.

“It is hard to not be driven by the bottom line and for many there is a battle at this stage for lives versus livelihood and I am confident that if we made too early a step without achieving wider testing through in country testing, without securing the urgent start of the first upgrade at IHC to at least expand ventilators care or without securing more medical personnel and without procuring a good supply of personal protective equipment, we will be nothing short of reckless

with the lives of our people. Whilst we accept that the virus is here and that we may have slowed the spread, we equally recognize that we cannot stay locked away forever and must be prepared for the real fact that there could be an outbreak. I believe that once testing which is now available in country, once widened, we will see a spike in numbers and I want us to be prepared for this. This is why we must move with urgency but with care. I say with all sincerity that whilst TCIG coffers equally suffer we cannot reopen phases without a plan to give us the best chance of building on our early gains and at the peril of our people's lives. It is not an easy decision but it is a necessary and important and yes a right decision. Today we take this step with Ministry of Health and God as our guide.

May God bless, guide and protect us all in Jesus name and may He continue to bless these Beautiful by Nature Turks and Caicos Islands.

**END**