

Media Statement – Minister for Health and Medical Services – MHMS COVID-19 Preparedness and Response

As Minister for Health, I believe that it is important that as a Ministry, we keep the people of Solomon Islands informed about COVID-19 (the Corona Virus) and what we are doing to prepare for it should the virus breach our shores.

To date, as many people would know, there have been more than 90,000 cases of COVID-19 reported around the globe. COVID-19 has now reached more than 70 countries. Whilst we are yet to have a reported case of the virus in Solomon Islands, we are doing everything possible to prevent the virus entering the country whilst also preparing for the potential that the virus will find its way here.

To date, my ministry has been proactive in working collaboratively with the Ministry of Commerce, Industries, Labour and Immigration including NDMO and the Prime Minister's Office on strategies to prevent COVID-19 from entering the country. This work has seen the release of two Joint Travel Advisories which I will leave my colleague Honourable Clezy Rore Minister for Commerce, Labour, Industries and Immigration to speak in more detail about. These Travel Advisories have related to the introduction of

strict public health screening processes of visitors and returning residents at our international ports of entry into the country.

In addition to our efforts to prevent COVID-19 from entering Solomon Islands, as I said earlier, my Ministry is also working hard to prepare for the potential entry of the virus into the country. COVID-19 has been declared a public health emergency of international concern and has the potential to be declared as a global pandemic if the spread of the virus continues to accelerate. As a consequence, we need to be ready in case COVID-19 reaches Solomon Islands.

What does this mean? It means that there is a high risk of COVID-19 spread at global and regional levels and the impact risk of a COVID-19 outbreak in Solomon Islands is also high. With this in mind, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services has prepared a COVID-19 Operational Plan which Cabinet endorsed last Thursday, 27th of February. The COVID-19 Operational Plan summarises the activities that my Ministry is undertaking both to prepare for the entry of COVID-19 into Solomon Islands, and to respond to the virus if it does enter the country.

The Solomon Islands Government is committed to keeping Solomon Islands protected against potential threats and in response, approved contingency warrant funds totalling \$6.6 million last week to support MHMS COVID-19 prevention and preparedness activities.

Prevention and preparedness are key components of a strong foundation for the COVID-19 response, and contribute to a resilient Solomon Islands health system, as well as building resilience in our communities. Preparedness activities include identifying command and control structures and reporting mechanisms. It also involves preparation of plans and standard operating procedures, training of clinical and non-clinical staff including front-line workers at points of entry, ensuring that resources are ready and available and monitoring through enhanced surveillance activities. Preparedness activities are undertaken both at National and Provincial levels as I speak.

As part of Ministry of Health and Medical Services preparedness activities under the COVID-19 Operational Plan that I mentioned earlier, a great deal of work has been put into identifying suitable facilities that can be used for the quarantine of people entering the country who

have potentially been exposed to COVID-19. Quarantine facilities are being established both at and near the Henderson Airfield to enable prompt and safe quarantine of passengers should they need to be quarantined. We are also looking at establishing quarantine facilities at the Provinces in the near future.

In addition to quarantine, patient isolation facilities are being set up at the National Referral Hospital to accommodate and care for suspected and confirmed cases of COVID-19, should they arise. The WHO has defined specific clinical criteria which are being used world-wide to define suspected and confirmed COVID-19 cases.

The Ministry's Health Promotion Division is working hard at risk communication strategies and activities and is in the process of preparing COVID-19 a media strategy and fact sheets for printing for the information of both health workers and the general community. There will also be regular messaging over the radio and media outlets to ensure that people are knowledgeable about the virus and its symptoms. In addition, health workers are being trained in case definition, identification of suspected cases and the clinical management of suspected and confirmed cases.

The National Disaster Committee – Health (NDOC-Health) has been very busy for a number of weeks now leading the Ministry's COVID-19 preparedness and response planning under the leadership of the Committee Chair, Under Secretary Health Improvement, Dr Nemia Bainivalu. I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank Dr Bainivalu and the members of NDOC-Health for their tireless efforts to date in doing everything that they can to prevent the entry of COVID-19 into Solomon Islands and to be ready to deal with the virus should it breach our shores. I would also like to acknowledge the overall Leadership of my Permanent Secretary, Mrs Pauline McNeil in overseeing the Ministry's efforts in relation to COVID-19 preparedness and response. Our development partners too have been very supportive. DFAT is providing technical and financial assistance, as is WHO and UNICEF. The New Zealand High Commission has also reached out and indicated their preparedness to assist us in our endeavours against COVID-19. We are very grateful for the support being provided by our development partners.

In conclusion, I want to reassure the people of Solomon Islands that the Ministry of Health and Medical Services is working closely with our colleagues in other Ministries,

including the Ministry of Commerce, Labour, Industries and Immigration, Front Line Partner Ministries and the Office of the Prime Minister and doing everything possible to prevent COVID-19 entering Solomon Islands. Whilst I am confident of the success of endeavours in this regard based on the excellent work that was done to prevent Solomon Islands being affected by measles despite the measles outbreak in other countries in the region, the Ministry is also making sure that we are as prepared as we can be, IF COVID-19 does reach Solomon Islands.

As I close, I would also like to reach out to every citizen of this beloved country to pray and ask our Heavenly Father for his protection at this trying and challenging times.

God bless and safely keep this country and our people.

Thank you.

Honourable Dickson Mua, MP

Minister for Health and Medical Services