



NATIONWIDE ADDRESS

HON PRIME MINISTER MANASSEH SOGAVARE, MP

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Introduction

Fellow citizens, a very good afternoon to all of you.

We still have no vaccine for COVID-19. Therefore, the only effective strategy to combat this global pandemic is to prevent this deadly virus from entering our shores.

The number of global confirmed cases has gone past the 20 million mark. The number of deaths globally has reached 733,600. This lethal virus is showing no sign of slowing down. Instead, it is increasing at an alarming rate of more than 1 million new infections every 4 days, and about 20,000 deaths in the same period.

Western Border

Fellow Solomon Islanders, we are still COVID-19 free. However, we must not be complacent and careless.

As of this morning, the number of confirmed cases in Papua New Guinea stands at 214 with three deaths. It is evident that there is now community transmission in PNG.

My good people on Friday 7th August 2020, Papua New Guinea recorded its first case in Bougainville, just next door to Solomon Islands. This new development is a serious cause for concern at our western border and the country as a whole.

It calls for a stronger and more effective cooperation between the national Government and the provincial governments of the Western, Choiseul, and Malaita province under whose jurisdiction the Malaita Outer Islands is under.

I am pleased to inform you all, that my office with support from the Ministry of Health and the National Disaster Management Office, reached out over the weekend to the Provincial Secretaries of Choiseul, Malaita and Western province to discuss the latest COVID-19 situation across the border.

Many of you would have heard the service message put out by the Chairman of the Oversight Committee with the blessing of the three Provincial Secretaries, requesting all our chiefs, leaders,

churches, communities and congregations of all villages along the whole length of our western border in Choiseul and Western province and the Malaita Outer Islands, to take extra care to ensure COVID-19 does not enter through our villages at the border.

I reiterate that call and appeal to all of you, my good people along the western border to take extra precaution and practice great responsibility at this time. Only our negligence and irresponsibility will put the lives of all our fellow citizens at risk.

That said, I take this opportunity to also appeal to our families and friends from Bougainville to please respect our travel restrictions at the border. The western border has been closed by the Government of Papua New Guinea and also by the Government of Solomon Islands during this State of Public Emergency. Anyone crossing the border will therefore be breaking the laws of both countries.

The Government through the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force has since stepped up operations at the western border, and will not hesitate to take action against illegal border crossers.

To our people at the western borders, if anyone whether citizen or not attempts to land on our side of the border please;

- a) Do not meet with them or allow them to disembark or go shore;

- b) Tell them to remain in their canoe or boat;
- c) Inform police and health officials to take appropriate action.

Anyone that aids and abates anyone from the other side, whether citizen or not, to cross into our side of the border will face the full force of the law. Make no mistake about that. I must emphasize that only carelessness of our own people can weaken our defence against COVID-19.

Therefore, to all our good people along the western border the ability of our country to keep COVID-19 out from our western border rests in your hands as well. I plead with you to please do your best to protect our country, our villages, our families and our children – by not letting anyone from the other side of the border to cross and mix with our villagers or families.

Immigration and Border control

Fellow citizens, the Government has also strengthened its Immigration deployment plan to provide better support to its frontline officers. The Immigration Division has also developed a national COVID-19 response plan to deploy immigration officers right throughout the country.

The Government has deployed immigration officers to assist other law enforcement agencies to support multi-law enforcement operations led by National Health Operation Centre (NHEOC) and Police Operation Centre.

The Government's plan to beef up security around our borders will not only assist us in our fight against COVID-19 but also combat transnational border crimes. Solomon Islands is a country that has vast ocean maritime boundaries. It is a challenge to monitor our international borders. We are geographically located in a transshipment route for drug, arms trafficking and other transnational organized crimes.

We have intercepted pleasure crafts such as yachts in the past years transporting drugs through our maritime boundaries.

Just recently, the law enforcement prosecuted and convicted several individuals under *Emergency Powers (NO.2) COVID -19 Regulation 2020*.

Student Repatriation Plans

Fellow Solomon Islanders, the pandemic has not only interrupted student learning, but also seriously affected their safety, health and well-being.

Since the announcement of the pandemic by the World Health Organisation in March 2020, international travel had been affected. That has presented a challenge to execute timely repatriation of SIG-funded overseas students especially those who have completed their studies in the first semester of 2020.

That said, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade have been coordinating our discussions on repatriation of our nationals stranded overseas, including our students in overseas training institutions.

To-date my government has repatriated a total 755 including students citizens from various countries including Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, Panama, Vanuatu.

Priority for student repatriation would be for those that have completed their studies in semester 1 of 2020. The second priority would be the ongoing students who would be returning for holidays at the end of the year and those that have completed their studies.

I am also happy to inform you that due to the worsening situation of COVID-19 in the Philippines, my government has made the decision to repatriate our students from Philippines. Officials are now working on how best this can be done, to ensure that all our students are safe, that they are tested prior to their return so that we do not open ourselves to possible risk of bringing COVID into the country through our returning students.

Dates for repatriation flights will depend on the completion of risk assessments, pre-departure testing protocols, and securing of

agreement of the host governments to allow our students to leave given that they have travel restriction and Philippines is undergoing a lock down as well.

School updates

Fellow citizens, in relation to schools in the country, I am aware that there have been rumours going around that the Form 3 National Examinations will be cancelled this year.

I would like to make it clear that these rumours are NOT true. Form 3 exams will still be administered this year as well as for Forms 5 & 6 examinations. It is advisable that school principals, teachers, parents and students take note of this.

On the other hand, the ministry of education together with the National Disaster Operations Centre has begun the process in sending out the Incidental Standard Operating Procedures to all Emergency Zone Schools in Honiara including Selwyn College, Betikama Adventist College and St Joseph's Tenaru.

Schools have been encouraged to also draft and plan their COVID-19 plans to test its effectiveness using their own drills.

The Government through its relevant ministries are also currently working on a national simulation exercise for selected schools in Honiara. This will be made known in the coming days.

Donor funded projects

Fellow citizens, it is also pleasing to note that despite the pandemic, donor supported projects under the Ministry of Infrastructure & Development (MID) is gradually progressing.

These includes the Sustainable Transport Infrastructure Investment Projects, Transport Sector Project Design Facility, Greater Honiara Transport Plan, and the Kukum Highway Phase 2 preparatory survey works, Solomon Islands Roads and Aviation Projects and the Community Access & Urban Services Enhancement Component.

These are projects supported by our donor partners for bridges, wharves, airports and roads here in Honiara and around the provinces. Good citizens, one of the flagship projects under this sector, the Kukum Highway Phase 2 has experienced very slow progress because of the pandemic. Nevertheless, the feasibility study report and detail design have been completed and the consultants are working from Japan to finalise the survey report because of the travel restrictions.

As you are aware, the Kukum Highway project will include a 4-lane road from the Ministry of Fisheries to the Lunga Bridge and a two-lane road from Lunga Bridge to the Henderson Domestic Airport. Fellow citizens, most of these infrastructure projects are

either progressing on a snail pace or have been halted because of the current situation.

However, the Government is fully committed in ensuring these projects are completed.

MOU signed between MCT & MHMS

My good people, I am also pleased to note that the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services have signed, on Wednesday last week, a three-year cooperation agreement to incorporate COVID19 extra care, public health and safety measures. This will also include infection, prevention and control (IPC) into the tourism ministry's minimum standard requirement for tourism services mainly in accommodation, tours, transport and attractions.

That said, I would like to congratulate both the ministry of tourism and the ministry of health and their hard working staff for taking that initiative.

Health Updates

Furthermore, the Ministry of Health and Medical Service (MHMS) has conducted a one-day COVID-19 review last week with representatives of various Christian denominations to inform them of planning for the next set of risk communication activities.

In March this year, prior to the declaration of state of emergency, the Ministry had collaborated with the churches for the dissemination of COVID-19 information and preventative measures. Churches have since incorporated COVID-19 information into their church service announcements, and have assisted with the dissemination of COVID-19 pamphlets and brochures to their congregation members.

This ongoing partnership between the Government and churches must be encouraged to continue. Churches are important partners in our continuous fight against COVID-19.

Quarantine Stations

Last week, 267 persons graduated from their various quarantine stations, 123 graduated on Tuesday 4th of August and 144 on Thursday the same week. All 267 individuals have successfully completed their required quarantine days and quarantine testing protocols, which have certified them as free from COVID-19 and safe to return to their families and reintegrate into the society.

This includes individuals who have returned on recent flights ranked as high risk due to passengers having been to or have travelled through high risk countries around the world.

With these graduations, we now have only 50 persons still in quarantine and are yet to complete their quarantine period and testing protocols. Ministry of Health Surveillance team is continuing daily monitoring for any signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and so far, there has not been any suspected cases from the quarantine stations.

Honiara and Provincial testing capabilities

Recently the NRH's COVID-19 laboratory have received 5000 test kits for use with the qPCR machines to test COVID-19 cases by WHO. This is important to ensure that we can cater to continue conducting tests for returnees on upcoming repatriations flights as well as for those entering our borders via sea.

Establishing COVID-19 testing capabilities at provincial level is very crucial because of close proximity to the borders and because the majority of our population resides. Therefore, the government through the ministry of health have started to deploy components of COVID-19 testing capabilities such as bio safety cabinets followed by GeneXpert cartridges to Gizo hospital in the western province and Kilufi hospital in Malaita province. As soon as set up is completed, training of provincial lab technicians will commence. World Health Organisation (WHO) have also supported the delivery of 1200 cartridges that will be sent to Western and Malaita provinces to support COVID-19 testing. Thank you WHO.

Stimulus Package

The Oversight and Implementing Committee of the Economic Stimulus Package confirmed that the screening, approval and disbursement process of all applications is continuing. It is expected that this process will continue until September, 2020. The Committee also confirmed that there are 4 key components to the implementation of the Package.

The first segment looks at the export component within the agriculture, and forestry sector. Under this segment, the Committee already screened, approved and disbursed support to our major buyers and exporters, of copra, cocoa, kava and timber. The second stream of screenings and approval under this segment looks at all proposals categorized as local buyers, especially on cocoa and copra. This will be followed by screening of all applications to support farmers to increase their existing production. This process has commenced and will continue as all applications are now being received. Support to churches is also part of this segment and has been implemented.

The second segment of implementation include support or injection to SOEs, which include the Solomon Airlines, Solomon Water, and injection into the Development Bank of Solomon Islands. The Committee already implemented the injections into these 3 entities and currently in the process to inject funds into Soltuna as well.

The third category or segment include implementation of key infrastructures which are listed to be supported under the Package. Up to the end of July, 2 wharf/ramp and 1 bridge has been tendered and a financing arrangement had been signed with a bilateral donor to upgrade a domestic airport. The Committee also wishes to update that Kirakira Ramp is also included and is in the process to conclude an award to a local contractor. Kirakira Ramp work is expected to commence in October, 2020.

Furthermore, under this segment also includes the assessment and approval of investments or projects within the 50 constituencies as approved by Government. Youth engagements, and rental subsidies are also capture under segment 3.

The final and fourth segment covers the rest of the sectors that qualify for support under the Package. This includes, fisheries, tourism and other remaining activities in agriculture.

Conclusion

My good people, in conclusion, I would like to reiterate that the first case at the neighbouring Bougainville presents an alarming situation for our country. This has always been our concern.

Fellow citizens, we must come to realise, that the virus has finally arrived at our doorstep and we must be vigilant more than ever. The Government will continue to monitor the situation closely and provide timely information and advice to our people.

My good people, we must not let our guards down and we must brace ourselves for whatever situation that may arise. I encourage all good citizens at the Western border to remain alert, take extra care and be responsible citizens.

I also encourage all of us to continue to pray for God's guidance and protection over our country and our people.

It is in such times as this with this deadly virus literally at our doorsteps that we need each other's support. We can keep this virus out if we work together and take a united stand in our efforts.

We are one people, We are one nation, We are Solomon Islands.

To God be the Glory great things He has done.

IUMI TUGEDA AGAINST COVID-19.

May God Bless our Beloved Solomon Islands from shore to shore.