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Prime Minister Rt. Hon. Dean Barrow's Statement on Updated COVID-19 Response Measures

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Good morning, members of the media. Good morning, members of the public.

My fellow Belizeans,

Welcome to this morning's press conference, and, forgive me, but I must start this morning on a note of complaint. Today's press conference is another in what has become a regular, almost weekly series. The objective is always to update the nation in as comprehensive a manner as possible on where we are in the ongoing struggle to keep our country free from the novel Coronavirus. I try, by way of these briefings, to speak to both health sector and economic sector developments. I always come to you armed with material from Cabinet and from the apex National Oversight Committee. My aid in addressing you and answering your questions is the official notes of the deliberations of both bodies. Those notes help me to report accurately to you since, for the sake of transparency, fidelity to the record is essential. I was, therefore, distressed to learn yesterday that someone, not the official minutes keeper, had circulated his or her own version of the NOC discussions and decisions. That was wrong and a breach of confidentiality. Furthermore, the error was compounded by the fact that what was released was, in a number of instances, terribly inaccurate. I express the earnest hope that it won't happen again.

Turning now to the Ministry of Health's Coronavirus dashboard, you all know that we continue to be free of any active case. I, therefore, offer the customary, but always heartfelt, thanks to all our essential workers.

As of Wednesday, we had done 1,517 tests. There were five results still pending, with all others being negative except for the 18 you have long since known about. We continue to test on an average of three times per week. The fact that now we don't test as often as we once did has nothing to do with what that distorted report falsely described as a decision to conserve on supplies. Rather, it is that all the science, according to our Director of Health Services, proves that in our current circumstances testing of asymptomatic people is a low yield exercise. Accordingly, our present test level is entirely satisfactory of World Health Organization standards.

On the economic front you already, I believe, have the press release sent out yesterday updating the status of the Unemployment Relief Program. This shows that 43,726 applications have been approved to date. SSB has processed all those approvals and 94% or 40,927 of them were successfully paid. The rest is so far unpayable because the bank information of the applicants was either not submitted or the information they sent was inaccurate. Regarding the Food Assistance Program, these are the numbers: 46,686 households have been helped and now the on-the-ground assessment has been completed in 38 rural villages in Toledo, Cayo, and Orange Walk. Those people are beginning at this point to be helped.

Concerning what we are expecting from the International Financial Institutions, it is true that we are still in waiting mode. It is not true, though, that, as the inaccurate so-called notes state, no international funding will come in for the month of June. In fact, the first disbursement of the US 6.2 million dollars from the IDB is to arrive right after the bank's June 3rd signature of the amended loan contract. The other IDB line of US 12 million dollars is scheduled to be approved formally on June 20th; and the processing of the World Bank's 21 million US dollars is also to be completed in the latter half of next month, of June. There is US 50 million dollars more to be had from the World Bank, but those particular disbursements indeed won't happen before July.

Now Wednesday's meeting of the National Oversight Committee did agree with Cabinet on the further easing that is to take place as internally we proceed with the reopening of our economy. In dealing in some detail with

the relaxation of the state of emergency measures, I sound the usual caution. Please do not interpret the further lifting of restrictions as a free for all. I get it, that people are stir crazy, but we cannot afford to move too fast. I, therefore, ask again for strict observance of such safety protocols as do remain in place.

The amended S.I. to reflect the changes is being drafted. In fact, I believe the A.G. and the SolGen finished this morning. I was sent a copy but I have not had time to check it. What I tell you, then, is subject to changes, albeit, at the most, slight changes. In any case, that amended S.I. would take effect at 12:01 a.m. this Monday, June 1st. By that I mean that when you wake up Monday morning, the S.I. would be extant and would usher in the following.

The number allowed for gatherings with social distancing will increase from 10 to 40. In particular, our places of worship with the requisite space will be able, physically, to host congregations of that size.

Tacos and other street vendors can get back to business, but will need to comply with certain sanitary protocols. Those protocols are being finalized and will be handed to those who have emerged as the leaders of the street vendor community between today and tomorrow.

The permission to operate already given to open air restaurants will now be extended to all restaurants. This, again, is on condition that the physical distancing and other rules will still apply.

The sale of Boledo, much anticipated at least in some quarters, will restart and casinos will also be allowed to be reopened. Neither smoking nor alcohol consumption is to be allowed in the casinos.

Approval is being given for gyms in accordance with the strict guidelines ratified by the NOC. In accordance with those guidelines, gyms can now reopen.

All non-contact open air sports are to be permitted for practice and exercise purposes, and, in fact, exercise hours are no longer restricted to the 5:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. time slot. Sport fishing is also allowed.

General curfew hours are being broadened only for Fridays and Saturdays. Thus, on those two days, curfew will be from 9:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. All other days will remain at 8:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. The children's curfew stays generally at 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m., but minors can move about from 5:00 a.m. up to 8:00 p.m. on weekdays and 9:00 p.m. on weekends if, and only if, they are accompanied by a responsible adult.

As a result of those unofficial, leaked NOC notes, much confusion has arisen surrounding the holding of graduation ceremonies. The true position is this. Both Cabinet and the NOC received a proposal from the Belize High School regarding a particular mode for their particular ceremony. Acceptance of the proposal would have meant agreeing to breach the numbers cap of 10, now 40, on gatherings. Although both Cabinet and the NOC felt that what the Belize High School was proposing could be safely done, there was also a worry that permission to BHS could be seen as preferential treatment. Ultimately, the NOC asked that the Ministry of Education consult with all the principals of our high schools. The Ministry is to find out how the other high schools are planning graduation ceremonies that conform to the social distancing protocols and what the other principals think of the BHS proposal. There is, thus, no effort to impose any one size fits all template on the high schools. This is an information gathering exercise that will help in making a final decision regarding BHS. In fact, just before I set out this morning to come here, I had a message from the Minister of Education, and, if I can recollect correctly what he told me, it is this. All the principals have their individual plans for how they will conduct their graduation exercises, their graduation ceremonies, but they all say they are doing it in a way that will conform to the social distancing requirements. They say, again as I understand it from the Minister, that it is fine then for Belize High School to proceed on exactly that same basis. We will distill this information at Monday's NOC meeting, but I gather that the BHS principal has already been informed of what the result of the Minister's consultation with the other school principals is.

With that I conclude my sketch of the new rules, allowing me now to come to that extremely important matter of the reopening of our borders generally and the PGIA in particular. Of course, the Attorney General will tomorrow at 3:00 p.m. take to the "Ask the Experts" program and, in what is his now customary fashion, go through the S.I. line by line for the benefit of the public. Take the final position from him, because I have, as I said, talking to you now, not been able to go through the draft, and so what I am giving you are the highlights, which won't change. They might be added to, but remember that I content myself with just this sketch of the major points constituting the changes that the S.I. will promote now.

So, this question of the external reopening, I make clear at once that an early loosening of the entry prohibition at our land borders was never on the cards.

That is because, in only the last week, the number of COVID-19 cases has surged in the countries surrounding us:

Mexico went up by 25% from 56,000 to 75,000

Guatemala by 80% from 2,200 to 4,000

Honduras by 50% from 3,000 to 4,400

El Salvador from 1,600 to 2,100.

In the case of Mexico, questions have arisen as to whether there is underreporting. That notwithstanding, Mexico is now globally the 17th most infected out of 200 countries and territories.

It is in that context that we agreed that there would likely be a considerable wait before we could unseal our land borders. On the other hand, there has been the most anxious, searching, and intense debate at both NOC and Cabinet over a possible standalone reopening of the PGIA. It is no secret that we have, since around a month ago, been aiming for a July 1st recommencement of operations at our only international airport. Indeed, by majority vote at both the Cabinet and the NOC, the decision was made to confirm that July 1st date, subject to certain conditions being put in place.

It surely is not hard to understand why we so ardently wished for a go at the PGIA. Tourism is our largest job creator and the biggest contributor to GDP and foreign exchange earnings. In 2019, for example, total tourism expenditure in Belize was 502.3 million US dollars. But COVID-19 is decimating the industry. The devastation is such that between January and April of this year, tourist spending in Belize fell by 82 million US dollars over the same period last year. And until the PGIA can reopen, it is only going to get worse.

Now even as we pushed to reopen, we had to bear certain facts well in mind. With regard to international travel prohibitions, the US decision to ban Chinese visitors from as early as January of this year was widely applauded. At its peak though, only 82,000 of 1.3 billion Chinese were infected and Chinese visitors to the US represented just about 3% of the US's total annual visitors. Yet the US proceeded with its embargo on Chinese travel to America. Currently, the US also bans visitors from Brazil; 320,000 Brazilians are infected of a total population of 210 million, and Brazilians represent just 4% of visitor flows to the US.

In our own case vis-à-vis the US, we had to reflect on the fact that there are 1.8 million Americans infected, a third of all COVID-19 deaths are US, and that country is the source of 75% of our visitors. So, the US in circumstances

of a relatively minuscule visitor flow from Brazil and China, nevertheless froze all travel from those two countries. The logic for our initial proscription ban on travel to Belize from the US in the context of their world leading infection rate and their being our 75% source market, is thus clearly irrefutable. That is why our drive to reopen PGIA had to be subject to our doing our absolute best to mitigate the undeniable and serious risk of imported infections coming from any resumed flow of US visitors.

Accordingly, the decisions of the NOC and Cabinet regarding the PGIA were premised on our first putting in place a comprehensive set of protocols to govern reopening. The centerpiece of this was/is to be a testing requirement. Now it is a fact that reliable rapid tests, on which I personally had pinned a lot of hopes, are not currently available. Our only recourse was, thus, to go with the PCR tests that currently both we and the US use, and which are the WHO gold standard. What we decided was that US, and other visitors would be able to come to Belize via the PGIA, on one principal condition. They would need to present upon arrival a negative COVID-19 PCR test result; and they would need to have obtained that negative result no earlier than 72 hours before traveling.

We checked via our Embassy in Washington and our Consulates in Miami, Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago, on the ease or otherwise of getting tests in the US in preparation for travel. It became clear that the processes differed widely from state to state and even among different counties in the same state. Still, the requirement for travelers to test remained a sine qua non for us as we sought to protect our Coronavirus-free record in the midst of any external reopening.

We, therefore, informed, via the Belize Tourism Board, the airlines of this condition that would attach to travel from North America to Belize. They did not object and the information was that they would still be prepared to come. We, therefore, appeared all set to confirm this morning our July 1st PGIA reopening. Alas, what the poet said about the best laid plans of mice and men proved only too true on this occasion.

Yesterday IATA, the International Air Transport Association, sent a message to our Director of Civil Aviation. That message made clear IATA's disapproval of the Belize travel testing requirement. According to IATA, that could not work now, and Belize should wait on the development of a reliable rapid test that would allow for the airlines themselves to administer a pre-boarding test.

After that the dominoes started falling. The carriers changed their tune, and it became clear that they would not fly to Belize if we insisted on travelers coming armed with a negative test result. I repeat, though, that our paramount safety concerns mandate our holding firm on that requirement.

Long story short? I am in consequence of all this today unable to confirm July 1st as a firm reopening date for the PGIA. If IATA holds its position that is seemingly mirrored now by the airlines, we will not be able to reopen until there is mass availability of approved rapid tests. Now, of course, in the meantime, if there are chartered carriers that would want to come to Belize on condition that their passengers would in fact be able to present a negative test result upon arrival, we would reopen for that sort of a purpose. But generally, because of the position now taken by the airlines, there cannot be the hoped-for reopening of the PGIA on July one. Of course, there are already rapid tests on the market but not with the needed degree of specificity and sensitivity. Everything suggests, though, that rapid testing nirvana is imminent. And the moment that happens, we will be good to go. Having not been able to secure July 1st, you will understand that I don't feel comfortable hazarding a guess, an estimate, as to the actual new date. We, therefore, take it one step at a time with the commitment continuously to update you as the situation unfolds.

I close with one assurance. GOB is working with the DFC on funding tourism sector loans at concessionary rates as a stopgap until the sector can return to strength.

In other words, in this as in all other things we, this country, will come through. Given how well we have done in containing COVID-19, everyone surely knows that this note of hope is not at all misplaced but absolutely and completely justified.

Thank you and I am certainly now prepared to take your questions.