

**CONTAINMENT OF COVID-19 AND PROGRESSIVE
RE-OPENING OF THE ECONOMY**

STATEMENT BY HON PRAVIND KUMAR JUGNAUTH

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SITTING OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

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Mr Speaker, Sir,

I have a statement to make on the containment of Covid-19 and the progressive reopening of the economy. Since the statement is quite long, I shall request the indulgence of Honourable Members to bear with me.

The House will recall that when we last met on Friday 20 March 2020, I made a statement in which I explained the Government's preparedness plan and response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the measures we were implementing to prevent the entry and spread of the coronavirus in the Republic of Mauritius.

In my statement, I did emphasise the fact that, since early January, with much foresight, the Government had been acting proactively in addressing the emerging and serious threat posed by the spread of the coronavirus from the city of Wuhan in China. I can now say with reasonable satisfaction that Government had prudently and responsibly taken the right decisions at the right time.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

Since then, as we are all aware, the coronavirus has continued its inexorable spread across the globe and has been wreaking havoc in its path, stunning some countries and overwhelming their health authorities by the sheer scale of its impact and the resulting death toll. And there is as yet no proven antidote or vaccine to eliminate this invisible enemy, which COVID-19 is. The pandemic is testing the world's best scientific and medical brains as well as the limits of human resistance and resilience, and human adaptability. Indeed, the impact of the pandemic on the global economy has also been on an unprecedented scale. In fact, it is qualified as being worse than the 2008 financial crisis, and even greater than the "Great Depression" of the 1930's.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

As far as Mauritius is concerned, when we last met on Friday 20 March, I informed that we had 12 cases of COVID-19. The situation worsened rapidly and the number of daily new infections started to rise and reached a peak on Thursday 9 April with 41 reported cases of new infections. In view thereof, and equally taking into account the deteriorating situation at the international level, the Government, and our health authorities, stepped up our vigilance

and have been working tirelessly and relentlessly to contain the spread of the disease. As a matter of fact, the Government took some very bold and necessary measures, in order to stop the spread of the virus. These measures include the following:

- (i) timely implementation of quarantine measures and designation of new quarantine facilities – in fact with the arrival of more passengers, mainly Mauritians coming back to the country, 20 hotels were turned into quarantine centres in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism and AHRIM;
- (ii) posting of Medical and non-medical staff from the Ministry of Health and Wellness to all quarantine centres;
- (iii) regular disinfection of quarantine centres until end of use and handing over;
- (iv) extending all the necessary resources to the health authorities to wage the war against the Covid-19;
- (v) extension of the total ban on travellers to enter the territory of Mauritius;
- (vi) suspension of all flights to Rodrigues so as to keep the Island free from Covid – 19;

- (vii) preventive measures were also taken to protect the island of Agalega;
- (viii) making of the Prevention and Mitigation of Infectious Disease (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020 to deal specifically with the COVID-19 pandemic;
- (ix) issue of first Curfew Order on 23 March 2020 by the Minister of Health and Wellness to break the circuit of transmission of the virus;
- (x) concurrent closing of all trading premises as an additional measure to prevent the spread of the virus;
- (xi) extension of the Curfew Order on three occasions, as the situation so warranted;
- (xii) maintaining strict control and monitoring at port level, including systematic checks for all cruise ship passengers entering the Mauritian territory while applying entry restrictions that were ongoing for various countries and parts of the world;
- (xiii) urgent procurement of medical supplies, protective equipment such as ventilators, test kits, swabs, PCR reagents amongst others. In fact, we arranged for Air Mauritius to airlift more than 340 tonnes of such medical supplies and materials from China;

- (xiv) procurement of additional drugs and protective equipment such as, surgical and N-95 masks, Personal Protective Equipment, goggles, gloves, and other essential requirements;
- (xv) screening of health workers, Police officers, Prison officers, prisoners, foreign workers and staff and inmates of homes and shelters;
- (xvi) launching of sample community screening campaign for COVID-19 using Rapid Antigen Tests, directed towards front liners;
- (xvii) ongoing training of Health staff in collaboration with the World Health Organisation;
- (xviii) establishing protocol for treatment of COVID-19 patients using chloroquine and other drugs and plasma pheresis in severe cases using blood donation from cured patients;
- (xix) creation of a HOTLINE 8924 for all matters related to COVID-19 and Health Issues;
- (xx) undertaking massive education and sensitization campaign in the media on preventive and hygiene measures, including the creation of a dedicated web page and mobile app;
- (xxi) putting into place a home visit system for urgent cases necessitating medical intervention; and

- (xxii) putting into place a triage system in all Regional Hospitals in order to direct patients with COVID-19 like symptoms to flu/fever clinics, thus limiting contact with other patients.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

The Government has all along been very sensitive to the adverse human rights impacts of the drastic economic downturn, and of the disease itself, particularly on the most vulnerable families. In order to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and of the containment measures on the population and reduce their hardship, the Government came up with a host of measures which included:

- (i) distribution of basic food items to shelters, homes, charitable institutions and to families who are on the Social Register of Mauritius;
- (ii) allowing people to go out during the curfew to avail themselves of urgent medical treatment, essential supplies, foodstuff and medical and other items essential for their subsistence of livelihood;
- (iii) introduction of COVID-19 Wage Support Scheme to provide financial support to employees becoming technically unemployed on a temporary basis - the Scheme covers the travel and tourism

- sectors, export oriented enterprises, ICT/BPO, SME'S and in other formal sectors of the economy including charitable institutions;
- (iv) introduction of Self-employed Assistance Scheme for those in the informal sector;
 - (v) opening of supermarkets, hypermarkets and retail shops, with shopping allowed in alphabetical order and subject to strict sanitary conditions;
 - (vi) an online platform for purchase of limited goods from authorized supermarkets;
 - (vii) setting up of the COVID-19 Solidarity Fund to finance projects and programmes related to COVID-19 and to provide financial support to persons and organisations affected by COVID-19;
 - (viii) setting up of the COVID-19 Projects Development Fund to finance, inter-alia, projects specified in the Public Sector Investment Programme;
 - (ix) introduction of price control on hand sanitizers, respirators, masks and on certain identified essential food items and sanitary products;
 - (x) ensuring adequate supply of basic commodities (potatoes and onions) by the Agricultural Marketing Board;
 - (xi) use of distance and online media for schooling purposes;

- (xii) payment of child allowance to all families on the Social Register of Mauritius;
- (xiii) arrangements for carers looking after elderly and persons with disabilities to also provide them with amenities, including food items and medicines;
- (xiv) payment of basic pensions at their place of residence – these are usually, paid through Post Offices; and
- (xv) creating a hotline for victims of domestic violence.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

We have also been maintaining all essential services, through the issue of Work Access Permits, so as to ensure safety and security and reduce hardship during the curfew period. However, appropriate instructions were issued to all public sector organisations to implement the recommended preventive measures so as to protect the health of all employees at the workplace, as recommended by the International Labour Organisation. Similar measures were implemented in the private sector as well.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

Much has been said in various quarters on the repatriation of our compatriots from abroad during the curfew period. Let me state in no

uncertain terms that the Government has all along been very sensitive to the plight of all our compatriots who were stranded abroad and has acted accordingly. In fact, Mauritius was one of the first countries to have repatriated its citizens from Wuhan on Sunday 02 February 2020 with the assistance of the Chinese and French authorities. The Government also provided its assistance and support to all our nationals residing in China who had expressed their willingness to return to Mauritius by Thursday 20 February 2020. We managed to repatriate 35 other Mauritians who were stranded following the spread of COVID-19 in other parts of China. Let me stress on the fact that we took those measures before Wednesday 11 March 2020, that is before WHO declared Covid-19 as a pandemic. Soon after, our diplomatic missions were heavily solicited by more than 1700 Mauritians worldwide.

After the issue of Curfew Order and closing of air space in Mauritius, we also managed to repatriate 935 Mauritians within four days from UK, France, Turkey, Australia, UAE, South Africa, India and Reunion Island before the closing down of air space in those countries. 11 Mauritians were also repatriated from Maldives on Saturday 11 April 2020, and another 29 from Paris on Sunday 26 April 2020.

At the moment, the Government is doing its very best to provide necessary support to the 3000 or so Mauritians who are currently abroad and who wish to return to Mauritius. These Mauritians are either on tourist visits, medical treatment, students, business, pilgrimage or working on cruise ships. Many of them are in fact crew members working on cruise ships harboured in 41 ports around the world. The Government has continuously been engaged in direct consultations with the cruise companies to ensure the safety, welfare and good health of our citizens.

The Government is pursuing its efforts for the orderly and phased return of Mauritian nationals in the face of numerous challenges arising in the context of the escalating crisis situation and the international and internal flight restrictions and lockdown measures prevailing in those countries.

The following criteria will apply for establishing priority for repatriation:

- (a) patients and one accompanying relative or carer;
- (b) elderly persons above 60; and
- (c) families with toddlers.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade is currently coordinating the return of stranded Mauritians from other countries. As a matter of fact, a flight from Johannesburg brought back 77

Mauritians on Thursday 30 April 2020 and a second flight is planned for Friday 08/Saturday 09 May 2020 with 150 stranded Mauritians from Mumbai and Delhi.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

I would also like to emphasise the fact that the Government has all along been managing the crisis in a very transparent manner. We have been holding daily briefings to keep the population informed on the evolution of the COVID-19 situation both at national and international levels. We have also been subjecting ourselves to media scrutiny through direct questions and answers from the press. However, at some point in time, access to members of the press to our daily briefings became risky and we consequently decided, in the interest of one and all, to shift the Questions and Answers session on a virtual platform. Moreover, I have personally been addressing the nation on specific occasions to update them on the major Government decisions regarding the containment of COVID-19.

Mr Speaker Sir,

The figures we have been obtaining lately, about the new cases of infections, indicate that COVID-19 is well under control in our country. I must say that this is largely thanks to the commitment, dedication, courage and professionalism of all our front liners, including first and foremost our doctors, nurses and other health care workers, police officers, employees in other essential services and all those who have been helping to keep the country going in these difficult times. They have been dedicating themselves heart and soul at the service of the nation in these testing and trying times. I would like to pay tribute to all our heroes who led the fight against COVID-19 on the front to save our compatriots. They truly deserve all our admiration. We owe to all of them a huge debt of gratitude and we shall remain forever indebted to them.

Unfortunately, we lost 10 of our compatriots in the battle. I would like to express our deepest condolences to the bereaved families. I also convey my wishes for a prompt recovery to our compatriots who are still afflicted by the disease.

On behalf of my Government, I would also like to express our deep appreciation for the cooperation, understanding and discipline of the large

majority of the population during the curfew period. It is also thanks to their sense of discipline that we have been able to curb the spread of the virus in the country.

I would also like to seize this opportunity to thank all persons, organisations and partner countries for their valuable assistance and donations extended to Mauritius in its battle against the COVID-19.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

Although, we may not be out of the woods yet, we have through the relentless efforts of one and all, succeeded in curbing the progress of the disease to an extent that we consider it safe enough to ease the restrictions to some extent and move for a progressive reopening of economic and other activities. The strategy and action plan for the reopening, which the Government announced on Friday last, hinges around one central concern of Government and that is, the continued protection of public health, which remains our top-most priority.

We have to avoid, by all means, the risk of any set back with a resurgence of the disease that would squander the gains achieved through the confinement and also to avoid heavy strain on our health services and the economy in general.

The country must, therefore, remain on high alert and continue to strictly observe social distancing and sanitary guidelines. It is only through discipline that we can continue to keep the enemy at bay. We must also bear in mind that this is not the responsibility of the Government alone. Every single one of us has a role to play. This is what is unique about this battle. We can fight it and break the cycle if we come together. And together we WILL win, and together we WILL successfully adapt to the New World Order, from the economic and other related angles, that will emerge post-COVID-19.

I know it may at times be painful to stay indoors for a long time, away from friends and families. But it is for their sake as well. And then we have no alternatives. We all know what is at stake. When it comes to the safety and security of our people, we cannot afford to take any risk. We will stop at nothing to save lives. This is the reason why Government has opted for a cautious approach and extended the curfew period with the progressive reopening of economic and other activities. I am convinced that the Mauritian patriotic spirit will prevail and we will ultimately defeat COVID-19.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

Our nation has fought and won many other battles before. Like our forefathers who lifted themselves up from their bootstraps, boldly faced so many adversities and strongly resisted the whips and the scorns of their times, neither retreating nor surrendering from their relentless efforts in togetherness and solidarity to protect and save lives, the Government shall, in the national interest, neither retreat nor surrender from the measures we have taken to protect and safeguard the health of the population and to save lives which are in these trying times our topmost priority.

Mr Speaker, Sir,

Let me conclude by quoting Mr. Benjamin Disraeli "*The care of the public health is the first duty of the statesman.*" Unquote.

Thank You.
