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Prime Minister Rt. Hon. Dean Barrow Updates Nation on the Existing State of Emergency *April 23, 2020*

My Fellow Belizeans,

I take this opportunity to update you on the most recent developments in our ongoing struggle against COVID-19.

Thankfully, we are holding steady on the health front. Thus, there has been no new positive since Monday, April 13th. There were the two lamentable deaths; but no other of the 18 cases originally diagnosed is even in hospital. In point of fact, five are now pronounced as fully recovered, and all the others are at home recovering.

The mapping and tracing exercises done in San Pedro, San Ignacio, Corozal and Belize City, are just about complete, but random sampling continues. Also, we expect this Saturday out of Miami a resupply of reagents that will enable us to proceed with the full scope of necessary testing. The fact is, though, that we appear for now to have contained the clusters that arose particularly in San Ignacio and Belize City. This, of course, is no reason to let our guard down. Indeed, the opposite is true and our health care professionals will try to build on their success.

We have, since about a month ago, implemented the required measures to enforce social distancing, including constraints on business activity. Most recently, when our fear of Coronavirus spread was at its height, we actually enhanced our protective bulwarks. We did this by way of SI No. 55 of 2020, which came into effect at midnight on Holy Saturday. In consequence of that SI, there was the imposition of a complete Sunday lockdown, public transportation was brought to a halt, Government offices were closed to the public and additional private sector businesses were shuttered. Unless extended, these

extra barriers were to last until April 25th, 2020, except for the Sunday lockdown. That was to remain until April 30th, the full life of the rest of SI 55.

I am now able to declare officially that there will be no extension of the additional special buffers. They will, therefore, expire at midnight this Saturday.

We feel able to mandate this relaxation, precisely because of the containment of the cluster spread. Thus, in-country public transportation by land, air and sea will resume for essential workers and essential purposes. Those passengers, though, whether on bus, boat or plane will be required to wear face masks. Government offices will reopen and those additional businesses placed on total cessation can go back to operating during limited hours. As well, the special Sunday quarantine will disappear.

I repeat, however, that we are not flinging caution to the winds. So, after midnight on Saturday, all that will happen is that we will go back to the state of affairs that existed immediately prior to the inclusion of the additional measures in SI 55 of 2020. In other words, we will still be in lockdown mode though in a manner not quite as draconian as provided for by the additional special measures.

For avoidance of any confusion, the Attorney General will make media appearances as soon as possible after this statement. He will remind of the details of SI 55 minus the special measures and will answer all questions in order to make the new position absolutely clear.

And going forward, this is what will happen.

The original State of Emergency Proclamation will itself expire on April 30th, 2020. An extension is clearly needed but that can only be done by way of a Resolution of the National Assembly. There will, therefore, be a meeting of the House on Monday coming, and a meeting of the Senate the following day. Those meetings are for the sole purpose of approving the State of Emergency extension, and physical attendance in the Chambers will be limited to the bare minimum of members needed to constitute a quorum. Once the extension of the State of Emergency is approved by Parliament, a new SI will be drafted for the signature of the Governor General.

The National Oversight Committee is currently being advised by the National Task Force, the economic czars and the Health Team as to further relaxations that the new SI could safely permit.

The point is that we are looking at the commencement of a phased, calibrated restart of business and economic activity in Belize.

I repeat, that this will have to be a finely balanced exercise, especially since we cannot discount the possibility of a Coronavirus second wave. To underscore that, the National Assembly is being asked for a two-month extension of the State of Emergency; so, there will be an easing of rigor in the new regulations coming into force on May 1st, 2020. However, it will be to a studiously calculated degree as we continue to treat the preservation of life and health as our first priority.

In this regard, I wish again to salute all those on the front lines of this Coronavirus battlefield. I also wish to thank the Belizean people for their understanding, forbearance and the spirit of cooperation that has been in evidence since the start of the crisis. I reiterate the need for us to maintain strict adherence to social distancing and personal hygiene, as well as that good neighborliness that I just commended.

The two key citizen support programs, unemployment relief and food assistance, are proceeding apace. I thus record that as of this morning 33,771 persons had been approved for the jobless benefits, with actual payouts to 23,680 of them; and 8,017 households of 32,871 individuals have received grocery baskets. This is in addition to the 4,000 households that get pantry under that preexisting, long-standing initiative.

In light of all the advances we are steadily making, I wish to close on a note of confidence. I, therefore, restate my unshakable conviction that this fight against COVID-19 is one that we can win, one that we WILL win.

Thank you.