



Prime Minister Hon. John Briceño's National Address on Cabinet Retreat

February 28, 2022

Greetings from San Pedro where the Summit is about to start, but I have taken time out to report to you on Cabinet's first retreat which we held last week.

My ministers and I held in-depth discussions on the draft budget for fiscal year 2022 – 2023. We reviewed the IMF's concluding statement issued at the end of its recent Article IV consultation. While the IMF hailed our impressive economic performance, they cautioned that economically we are not out of the woods yet. Therefore, the Cabinet approved a budget that is prudent and pragmatic. We will emphasize an ambitious social policy agenda which centres on bringing relief to the more vulnerable among us, expanding the NHI program while continuing to rebuild the Belizean economy in partnership with the private sector, the Unions, and non-governmental actors.

We received a detailed report from the Ministerial Team which met with the joint unions. Significant progress was made in those discussion towards finding a path to restoring benefits for public officers and teachers. After careful deliberation, Cabinet has settled our position on these matters, and we will inform the Unions of the elements of that position which includes much needed pension reform. More importantly, we believe we have found a workable compromise which includes restoring the full 10 percent to public officers and teachers.

On COVID-19, the Cabinet has decided that it is time to re-balance responsibility in the fight against COVID-19. For some two years, the Government has responded to the pandemic by embarking on a massive public health campaign, securing hundreds of thousands of vaccines, heavily

imposing restrictions on personal freedoms and curtailing social and economic activities. The Cabinet has decided that the time has come to restore personal and economic freedoms, while encouraging everyone to act responsibly.

Effective 1st March the curfew will be lifted. The Minister of Health will provide more details of the process by which we will lift all measures during the month of March as we move towards normalcy on 1st April 2022. We continue to urge Belizeans to get vaccinated and for those who have not yet been boosted, we urge you to do so.

My Cabinet recognizes that there is a pressing need to address social issues such as the rising cost-of-living increases. While price increases are due largely to external factors, we believe that there are steps that can be taken by government to ease the hardship. We are actively reviewing the basket of goods on which tax relief can be granted, will vigorously increase enforcement of price controls, and adopt measures to curb price gouging.

Another important issue discussed during the Cabinet Retreat was governance. In this regard there was a strong sense that constitutional reform is needed to strengthen democracy in Belize. The Constitution is designed around a dominant Cabinet, and two main political parties. These structures, which were designed in the previous century, must be reviewed and reformed to meet the needs of a more democratic Belize. To this end, a People's Constitutional Commission will be appointed to undertake this major task of constitutional reform and is expected to complete its work in 15 months.

Since taking office we have done what was necessary to rescue Belize from financial disaster, protected Belizeans from the COVID-19 pandemic and, we started to implement our social justice agenda set out in Plan Belize. We will continue the work and press on with delivering on our promise to build a nation where everybody wins.

I thank you.