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## **Prime Minister Rt. Hon. Dean Barrow Updates Nation on COVID-19 Response** *April 16, 2020*

My Fellow Belizeans,

I need periodically to bring you up to date on our war against COVID-19, and it is for that purpose that I address you now. There are, of course, two basic fronts to our campaign: the medical and the socioeconomic.

Regarding the medical, I am certain that we are making every effort to do the right thing. The nationwide lockdown is one sure way of helping to contain the spread of the virus. Accordingly, that lockdown will be made to run at least its 14-day course.

The core medical team, tirelessly led by Dr. Marvin Manzanero, is receiving more expert support than ever. Several additional medical personnel have joined the National Task Force and have been given various critical assignments. Gaps and omissions are being addressed in as inclusive a manner as possible, in which connection the preliminary understanding reached with the KHMHA Union is key.

Ample testing has always been our necessary objective, and a decisive increase is now in full flood. This has been made possible by the acquisition of a better than sufficient supply of test kits, accompanied as well by the procurement of more PPEs. We are therefore well-armed to pursue and try to control the Belize City and San Ignacio outbreaks, the COVID-19 clusters.

I say again that we are as fortified as we can be in combating this most deadly and elusive of enemies. And I salute all those, especially the front line health and essential workers, that have been in the vanguard of our press against this demon foe.

I also remind Belizeans, though, that you are the ground troops in this battle. So, hold the safety standard high. Wear your mask; practice good hygiene; adhere to social distancing; lend a hand to your neighbor; and please refrain from spreading rumors.

I turn now to the socioeconomic aspect of what is proving to be our long nightfall.

Our principal efforts here are twofold: to disburse all needed unemployment relief funds and to roll out an emergency countrywide food assistance program.

We are in the middle of an economic shock the likes of which the modern world, let alone our beloved Belize, has never seen. Business activity has come almost

to a halt, people have lost their jobs and livelihood, and revenue sources have dried up. The tax base has utterly eroded and we are terribly short of money. We are without coin of the realm and it is not possible to collect anything but a trickle. Still, Government must operate and the country must be kept going. We have to find salaries, especially for our doctors and nurses, our security forces, immigration and customs officers and all the public servants that keep the Administration operational. We must keep the lights on and the water flowing. We must pay for the PPEs and the testing kits and the Cuban brigade that has left their homeland to assist us.

Above all, we must help our people, we must feed our people.

It is an unprecedented challenge, it seems an impossible task. But it is one we go after with hands and heart, and we will prove equal to the job. Borrowing from our Central Bank, working with the international donor community, employing every resource we can, we WILL deliver to our citizens in need.

As of today, then, 23,264 persons have already been approved for unemployment relief, and their payments sent to their banks. Ultimately, this particular safety net will cover upwards of 50 thousand persons.

Likewise, 4,000 households, for a total of 17,000 beneficiaries, have received food baskets. This first tranche of that particular program is costing Government 12 million dollars.

Now this unparalleled outreach in this unparalleled time has not been perfect. We wish that the money and the food could be more. We wish that the distribution process could be faster. But the shock to our lives, our economy, our systems, is like nothing any of us has ever witnessed. Everything has been shattered, our capacity is under the most unimaginable strain. And as has been demonstrated in even the great United States of America, it will take more than a day, a week, a month to put Humpty Dumpty together again.

The unmistakable fact though, is that we will manage, that we are managing, this labor of Hercules. What we find for our people can by no means be a princely sum. We can't give food baskets that are overflowing to excess. But no one will be left behind; no one will have to do without; everyone will get the basics; and all will be able to survive on what Government will provide.

With the 75 million dollars borrowed from the Central Bank of Belize, we are able to help the unemployed for at least the next seven months. Furthermore, the pace of disbursements will continue to accelerate as we straighten out the processing kinks.

Of course, no one knows how long this grim COVID reaper will be with us. But the Government, as the coverall for Belizeans, is in this for the long haul. The monies from the International Financial Institutions are taking some time to reach us, but they are coming. Thus, we expect at least 30 million dollars more for food assistance. And there should be 100 million dollars to augment our already existing BOOST program.

Now BOOST is a form of cash transfer to the needy, and is separate and apart from the unemployment relief. As the 100 million dollars come in, people currently getting food assistance will be placed instead on BOOST. That is because the BOOST will last longer. With the cash transfer, they will then be able themselves to buy their food, and this will ease the distribution strain on the Ministry of Human Development. As well, the pre-existing food pantry program under which people paid a minimal amount, has now become completely free.

The point is that Government is doing everything humanly possible, deploying every ingenuity so that -- to repeat our mantra -- absolutely no one will be left behind.

These are the hardest of times. But all the details of the Government response that I have just gone into, are designed to make one thing crystal clear. There is no need for despair. No one need feel helpless. And that is because we that are called upon to do so, will take care of you. This is our sacred duty and one that we will discharge to the limit.

I close by making one other promise to you. All that we do is without regard to color, red or blue. No politician of any stripe will get hands-on any GOB money, whether for unemployment relief or for food distribution. This is the way we have begun and this is the way we will continue.

To those on both sides of the aisle that would have it otherwise, there is only one response. The nation comes first, and country over party every time.

Thank you.