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Prime Minister Rt. Hon. Dean Barrow Announces Countrywide State of Emergency

My Fellow Belizeans,

Last week, the Government announced additional measures to ramp up our fight against COVID-19. At Wednesday's press conference I made clear that we were not then announcing a national shutdown. The circumstances at that time, in our view, did not yet warrant it. But I also made clear that we should prepare ourselves for just such an eventuality: that there were possible, indeed likely, developments that would act as triggers for a shutdown.

As we all now know, yesterday, a Belizean that had returned from New York on March 20th, tested positive for the novel Coronavirus. That person claims to have been in self-isolation since his arrival back in Belize and was able to show health workers the contained and separate lower flat of the building in which his claimed isolation took place. The individual, though testing positive, is exhibiting only mild symptoms and is not currently in need of hospitalization. Nevertheless, he is living in Belize City -- home to the largest population concentration in our country. For the National Oversight Committee, and for the Cabinet of Belize, this is very significant. Clearly the crowds in the old capital make us more susceptible to widespread transmission. Thus, a comprehensive tracing of the afflicted individual's possible contacts and a wider mapping exercise are both being done by the Ministry of Health team.

In this connection, both the evidence from other countries and the advice from our own experts agree on one thing: the best way to at least slow, and hopefully stop, the spread of the virus, is by strictly enforcing the physical distancing, self-isolation, quarantining and other such rules. Even though we have already imposed a state of emergency for Ambergris Caye and passed two statutory instruments imposing penalties -- including jail time for those that do not comply with the law -- too many Belizeans are not taking the measures seriously enough. In all the circumstances, we consider it our duty now to do even more to prevent any chance of Belize City becoming an epicenter of COVID-19, indeed, to try to protect our entire country from the novel Coronavirus.

Accordingly, I will be advising His Excellency the Governor General to declare a nationwide state of emergency for the country of Belize. This will go into effect at midnight on Wednesday, April 1st, and will include a curfew from 8:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. every day. The state of emergency is to last for 30 days in the first instance. For its duration people will be advised to shelter in place even during daylight hours and only to come out as absolutely necessary for purposes of procuring supplies, and doing such business and activities as are exigently required.

Our National Task Force and our Caucus of CEOs have been planning for this eventuality for some time now. Nevertheless, and as we had promised, we are

giving a couple of days' notice for two reasons. Our people must have a chance to prepare for the new normal; and our officials must have a little more time to ensure that all systems are in place to guarantee the absolute availability of foodstuff and other critical supplies. The list of essential services and essential service workers is being finalized and their operational logistics are being fine-tuned.

Tomorrow, we will be holding a press conference for only the media at the Laing Building at 10:00 a.m. There, we will go into all the details -- medical, logistical and organizational -- about the state of the emergency. We will, of course, answer all questions from the media.

I close by expanding on two things.

First, I want to repeat what I said in last week's address to the nation. This country is self-sufficient in basic staples and we can feed ourselves for the long haul. The continuity of essential services and the more than ample availability of supplies are both guaranteed and there is no need to panic.

Supermarkets, grocery stores, banks and credit unions will all remain open and every arrangement is being made for local producers to proceed uninterrupted with the provision of meat, chicken, eggs, rice, beans, grains, vegetables and so on. Cargo will also continue to come into our country and essential imports are also secure.

The second point I must make is this. Our local health team and the Ministry of Health are so plentifully resourced that we could theoretically reach the point of equipment oversupply. I hasten to add, though, that there can never really be too much -- I'm just trying to underline the fact that we are completely prepared for the battle on the health front.

So, the Ministry of Health costed the requirements for a six-month battle against COVID 19 at around 12 to 15 million dollars, Belize dollars. We already have in hand close to 20 million dollars and 13 million more is arriving from the IDB in a matter of weeks. Therein, though, lies the beginnings of a possible problem. All the International Financial Institutions, perhaps understandably, are laser focused on the health front of this fight against COVID-19. As critical as that is, though, what I keep telling our international partner is that it is equally important for us to feed and clothe our people; for us to take care of those now out of work and livelihood, unable to take care of themselves and their families.

Government, as you know, is already borrowing 75 million from the Central Bank. But this is a drop in the bucket. It is my solemn promise to you, however, that we will get more. I am in no doubt that we will end up at least doubling that 75 million dollars. Thus, there will be add-ons to the disbursement of money to our unemployed, which disbursements start this week and will also initially utilize the contributions made by BEL, BWSL and SSB. The additional funding that we will procure will augment the national ongoing BOOST Initiative that also already puts cash in the hands of our people; and we will also expand countrywide, including to the rural areas, the Ministry of Human Development's all-important food assistance program.

Belizeans: I say again that you are not alone. Together we will overcome. And I swear by that Almighty God, whom I ask now to bless us all, that Government, our National Partnership, and I personally, will do everything to bring Belize as whole as possible out of this national and international nightmare.

I thank you.