



MINISTRY OF HEALTH

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| <p>STATEMENT BY HON. JELTA WONG MP MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND HIV/AIDS</p> |
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Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me this opportunity to make a statement to update this House on COVID-19 and PNG's response.

Mr Speaker, and Honourable Members of the Parliament, the purposes of this statement are firstly to update the House and to the Nation on the current status Pandemic of COVID-19 and Global menace it is causing and secondly to advise the House on the Government of PNG's response to this dreadful Pandemic.

The last time this House met, I presented to the House a Statement on the Health Sector's and Government Partners preparedness. At that time WHO only declared COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international concern. Since then WHO has declared COVID-19 as a Pandemic on 11th March when the number of cases were merely over hundred and ten thousand and over 100 countries reporting cases. Since then, the number of cases globally has increased almost 8 times and over 200 countries and territories have reported cases.

Mr. Speaker, the rate of infection is such that, when I finish this statement, there will be more than 500 new cases reported around the world. Worldwide people are comparing this pandemic as the 1918 pandemic of Spanish Flu.

On 20th March 2020, Papua New Guinea announced its first confirmed imported COVID -19 case in a traveller who arrived in PNG on 13th March. This detection has now pushed PNG into the containment phase of its response. However, technically speaking, we now have no case in the country as traveller “Z” has been sent back to his own country.

Mr. Speaker, and Honourable Members of this House, as you know, on 22nd March, Prime Minister Marape and the Cabinet advised the Governor General to declare a ‘State of Emergency’ (SOE) for 14 days for the entire country starting on the 24th March. The Commissioner for Police, Mr. David Manning has been appointed as the SOE Controller. Commissioner Manning has assumed control of the SOE assisted by a call out placed on military personnel to ensure lawful order, control and response to SOE control measures.

Mr. Speaker, it was also on the 24th March that we set up the Joint Agency Task Force National Operation Centre (JATFNOC-19) at the Morauta Haus Building. This also include the setting up of the 24/7 COVID-19 Call Centre with support from Saint Johns Ambulance, Telikom and Digicel.

Mr Speaker, allow me to inform this historic House some of the measures we have taken regarding the SOE. Some Regulations were gazetted on the 26th March 2020 to be affected through this Parliament.

Specific Orders of the SOE have been generated and endorsed to detail how the Controller will implement the SOE across the country. The orders include specific restrictions and allowances for:

- the movement of people, focussing mainly on health workers and businesses,
- designated ports of entry, as Jackson's Airport and Maritime ports of Motukea in Port Moresby, Lae, Rabaul and Madang.
- appointment of authorized officers in implementing the SOE regulations and orders of the controller,
- international border patrols,
- domestic and international travel,
- provincial functions in the SOE,
- public and private employment during the SOE,
- essential services, such as public utilities, during the SOE,
- social gatherings,
- and any other control measures that may be determined by the provinces which are not specified in the orders, such as curfews.

These are tabled to this Honourable House for the consideration.

Honourable Members of the House and Mr Speaker, please let me now update you on the Health Sector Response we have done till now.

To date we have screened close to thirty thousand (30,000) inbound passengers at the points of entry at the Jackson's International Airport and seaports in Port Moresby. The health team has identified 6,431 'persons of interest' (POI) and are being monitored regularly by the surveillance team for 14 days. More than two-thirds of these people have completed 14 days incubation period and cleared as negative.

In total 94 people has been tested with 1 positive result, 86 negative and 7 still pending completion of testing. Testing facility developed at Institute of Medical Research now can conduct 300 tests a day. From Wednesday, 1st April, the IMR Testing Laboratory within UPNG Medical School is ready to perform tests for ease of logistics. That will improve our capacity to conduct additional tests on 200 samples a day. We are also establishing other testing facilities in Madang and strategically in Vanimo and Daru.

The National Department of Health (NDoH) is working on implementing control measures and building its preparedness concurrently. Important tasks of contact tracing and testing is ongoing during the lock down period and it will allow for that work to be completed and checked.

There are still many POI to be followed up on and given the 14-day incubation period. Current capacity building in health facilities, PHAs and communities for the worst-case scenario is important. It is expected that the containment and potential mitigation phase for at least another 6 months from the time of the imported case, to localized transmission and to large scale transmission. Mitigation is already happening in our immediate neighbours Australia and Indonesia; it is important PNG stays vigilant.

Mr Speaker, anecdotal evidences from many countries suggests that ineffective containment measures and uncontrolled movement in densely populated cities have increased infection rates. Thus, the potential threat over the coming months remains high in PNG and our control measures applied to the entire nation must remain. Effective implementation of the control measures will create a stable environment should any escalation occur. It will also ensure that there is a clear line of authority and direction in managing the risks of community transmission and possible further imported cases. The prolonged period of the State of emergency will allow our preparedness to be built up with supporting enforcement of control measures by the PNGDF, RPNGC and other authorized personnel.

Honourable Members of the House, please let me emphasise that in the event there is community transmission detected in PNG, it is envisioned that the initial outbreak in urban areas and will overwhelm health system in about May to July

but will be delayed until about November for rural areas. Considering the trend seen in other countries, PNG may face shortfalls of between 1,000 to 30,000 hospital beds over the next year.

Mr Speaker, worldwide people are promoting social distancing measures which will reduce the number of cases. Let me emphasise I request for physical distancing and will reduce transmission. As leaders of the community, I request all the Honourable Members to create example by us practising the physical distancing.

Mr Speaker, let me be frank and open, thousands of deaths may occur across the provinces should there be an outbreak of COVID-19. It is important to continue upscaling of critical essential health programs to avoid further stress on current health systems. For example, during Ebola in West Africa there were more maternal deaths than Ebola deaths as the health system was unable to look after anything else.

Mr Speaker, on positive note, let me inform the House that we have an isolation ward ready at the Port Moresby General Hospital (PMGH) and we are transforming the Rita Flynn sports complex to another Isolation Unit if at all we need. We are in the process of procuring 30 tents with DFAT Australia funding which will be used as screening facilities at hospitals nationwide. We are also expecting United Nations in PNG to assists in providing ventilators for the isolation facility in NCD Rita Flynn Complex as well as for Provincial Hospitals.

Mr Speaker, personal protective equipment or popularly known as PPE is a high priority item particularly for frontline health workers' safety as well as for safety of other sectors' staff handling incoming people and goods.

Last week the Nurses Association raised concerns on their availability. Those concerns have been quelled and to date we have received PPEs from DFAT, WHO, UNICEF, and other private sectors.

The Department of Health also procured and procuring key PPEs in the wake of global demand and shortage of PPE. Key items of PPE, particularly the masks, gloves, goggles, coverall or gowns and shoe covers are immediately needed in large quantities over the next 6 months. We are pursuing various channels including requesting our international partners and outsourcing to private suppliers worldwide.

Mr Speaker and Honourable Members of this August House, I have to acknowledge that our health system has limited capacity, experience and resources to manage a potential large-scale response making the risk of spread as high in the event that outbreak of COVID-19 occurs in PNG.

Mr Speaker, let me reiterate what I said earlier to the House, Health is about Life – from the “Womb to the Tomb”, Health is highly technical, complex and expressive.

Health Services are delivered from a network of 2,608 health facilities ranging from a “one-person” aid post to huge hospital like Port Moresby General Hospital. The Health System requires adequate funding, readily available always to deliver services and to save lives.

I am thankful to the Current Government for giving priority to health but let me tell you, Mr Speaker; no money is enough for Health because, we provide direct life-saving services to our people. And in situation like this we need more.

Having said that, Mr Speaker, let me thank and commend our Prime Minister and the National Executive Council for appropriating money for the implementation of our COVID-19 Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan. Let me assure my colleagues that we will be judicious in spending this budget. However, we will need much more.

Mr. Speaker, through this House, I want to congratulate the tireless frontline health and other sector workers who are working to keep our country free from this threat. I would also like to thank the citizens of PNG for abiding by the directives of the SOE despite many problems in our personal lives.

M.r Speaker and Members of the House, let me offer our gratitude to our partners like, the Australia, New Zealand, Chins, Korea, Japan and other Governments as well as our Development Partners from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) World Bank, WHO, UNICEF and others who have been supporting the people of

PNG through financial assistance as well as key commodities including precious PPE.

I also extend my appreciation to the private sector and corporate citizens for coming forward and providing assistance and support to the overall efforts of the government thus far. These include Air Niugini, Telekom, Digicel, Kumul Consolidated Holdings, EMTV, Oil Search, Hevilift, the Media and many others.

It is our government's plan to foster effective partnerships and collaboration to enhance efficiency and effectiveness in a massive response operation of such magnitude. This brings us to be fully align with the United Nations plea, for whole of society's approach to combat global problems like COVID-19.

Finally, Mr Speaker, we all want to protect ourselves and our families from this Pandemic, but fear can do more harm than the virus. It can make us panic or do things which can make matters worse. Like circulating rumours online or blaming particular groups for the outbreak.

Mr Speaker, can I, through this House, once again remind the general public of their role in minimising the risk through the following key five messages;

1. wash your hand often
2. cough into your elbow
3. don't touch your face
4. keep a safe distance from others and,

5. Simply Stay at Home.

Remember the Virus Doesn't Move Unless People Move it. When we stop

Moving the Virus Stops Moving. Fear and anxiety are natural human reaction.

Mr Speaker, at the end I acknowledge the support of the Leaders, the Private Sector, the NGOs, and the Governors but will continue to seek further support from all of them and you.

Thank you, Mr Speaker and God bless.

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