



**HON. PRIME MINISTER STATEMENT TO THE NATION ON
STATE OF PUBLIC EMERGENCY**

27th MARCH 2020

HONIARA

Fellow Solomon Islanders,

Yesterday the Governor General, acting on the advice of the Cabinet made a proclamation pursuant to section 16 (2) of the *Constitution* that a state of public emergency now exists for Solomon Islands.

This was in response to the escalation of COVID-19 around the world and the imminent threat that it poses to us as a small and vulnerable economy.

The policy rationale is clear. It is the considered view of the cabinet that considering our lack of capacity to deal effectively with a fully blown out spread of the virus, our efforts must be focused firstly in protecting the country from the entrance of this serious threat to our national security, and secondly, to control the spread of the virus if it slipped through.

To be effective, our strategy requires the backing of the law, to enforce the much needed discipline and cooperation of our people, which are considered indispensable to the success of our national effort to fight against this threat to our national security.

Anything less than that would be considered inadequate. This is a giant leap in our strategic actions, which requires the full

understanding and cooperation of our people and due care on the part of the government to be successful.

I wish to reassure our good people that Government authorities have been working around the clock to manage this COVID-19 pandemic. These efforts will be further enhanced by the new powers.

The proclamation of a state of public emergency has activated certain processes which is now unfolding.

Fellow Solomon Islanders,

A proclamation of a state of public emergency sets the platform for the invoking of the *Emergency Powers Act*, which gives the Governor General, powers to make Regulations to deal with situations pertaining during a public emergency, and His Excellency has made the *Emergency Powers (COVID-19) Regulations 2020* pursuant to that Act. These Regulations were published in the Gazette this morning and is now in force.

The *Emergency Powers (COVID-19) Regulations 2020* has given me in my capacity as the Prime Minister of our beloved country certain powers to make orders during a state of public emergency. These powers are;

- (a) to declare a public place to be a quarantine station;
- (b) to prohibit the entry of a person or a class of persons into Solomon Islands;
- (c) to direct a person or a class of persons to comply with quarantine procedures;
- (d) to take possession of or requisition property to establish a quarantine station;
- (e) to declare a public place to be an emergency zone;
- (f) to restrict the movement of a person for the maintenance of order and security of the public in an emergency zone;
- (g) to temporarily close a public place;
- (h) to restrict the movement of vessels and aircrafts;
- (i) to suspend access to online media outlets or media outlets;
- (j) to make an Order for the National Disaster Council to coordinate and implement emergency operations;
- (k) to order the release of special funds provided for under other laws of Solomon Islands to implement public safety measures.

Orders made

In exercise of the powers vested upon me under the *Emergency Powers (COVID-19) Regulations 2020* I have already made six orders. These are;

- (a) An order declaring Honiara to be an emergency zone starting from Alligator Creek to Poha River; and
- (b) An order to temporarily close the following places in the emergency zone

- (i) nightclubs;
- (ii) kava bars;
- (iii) bars;
- (iv) Casinos

(c) An Order for the release of Members Discretionary Fund under Regulation 9(3)(a) of the Members of Parliament (Entitlements) Commission Regulations 1988 to Members of Parliament for the purpose of the repatriation of public officers or of the public of their constituency from Honiara to their village.

(d) An Order declaring designated places a quarantine stations

(e) An Order to prohibit the entry of Non-Citizens into Solomon Islands

(f) An Order to ban pleasure vessels entering Solomon Islands

Question on Churches

Whether churches as a place of public gathering should be closed now is a matter we are currently consulting with SICA; and SIFGA on. As a country that professes Christianity and the supremacy of God over the affairs of our nation, I am conscious of the fact that this is a decision that I must take with great caution and with the wisdom of God.

I believe in times of national crisis, the place to be for all Christians is in the House of God, pleading for the nation. For that reason, churches within the emergency zone will remain open this weekend to allow normal church services to continue and for church members to have congregational gathering to worship and seek God's intervention.

SICA and SIFGA have been requested to organize a comprehensive prayer vigil and nationwide preaching roster over the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation this weekend to bring our nation closer to God and to remind all, that without the direct intervention of God in our strategic planning, our efforts will be in vain.

If there is a time this nation must put aside our differences and return to God, it is NOW! We are promised that if our hearts are right with him, he will heal our land.

I will continue to make other orders as and when necessary in the coming days.

International Flights and Borders

We are in the process of closing our borders for international flights which is being progressively implemented with a partial lock down of international flight services currently in effect.

Solomon Airlines scheduled flights have been suspended and will only provide flight services as and when required to support emergency operations and the repatriation of our citizens should that become necessary.

In that connection, only returning citizens and residents have permitted to enter our country from the Brisbane – Honiara flight. Upon arrival over the past week they have been placed under strict compulsory quarantine for 14 days in our quarantine facilities. There will be no other incoming flights to Honiara.

The government is working with the People’s Republic of China to establish our capacity to conduct testing locally as a strategy to speed up the process of establishing the status of a suspected case. This will be possible when we receive our COVID-19 testing kits next week.

With that capacity in place we should be able to review the Brisbane-Honiara flight arrangement with the view to reduce it to essential flights only. The government is taking this seriously because the only way that the virus will enter the country is through passenger arrivals by air.

We appreciate that this measure is going to put Solomon Airlines under serious financial situation. The government is holding

talks with the Airlines management to establish the effects of these measures on the airline and to agree on measures to keep the airline operating during this difficult time.

The Welfare of Our Students

The Government is concern about the welfare of our students studying in various educational institutions in and outside the region, especially in countries that have registered positive cases of COVID-19, and is in active communication with our diplomatic missions in or accredited to these countries to establish their status and any advice from the host countries.

The countries of immediate concern are Fiji and the Philippines where the majority of our students are studying. Philippines has imposed a complete lock down, which makes any evacuation plans unworkable. Fiji has also imposed a complete lock down in Lautoka and may do so in Suva very soon.

Whilst the option for evacuation remains open, we will be bound by the internal safety, security and quarantine requirements imposed on citizens and residents by the host countries and any instructions that the host countries will not guarantee the safety of our citizens and therefore requested their evacuation.

For that purpose, Government is in active communication with our Missions abroad and at this point in time receive no instructions that the host countries will not guarantee the safety of our students to warrant the implementation of any evacuation plan immediately. The government also acknowledges the comprehensive safety measures imposed by the host countries which our students are required to adhere to for their safety.

The Government is also concerned that a mass repatriation of our citizens from affected countries may compromise our safety measures due to lack of adequate quarantine facilities now in country, and while the government is working tirelessly to make more quarantine places available, it will take some time.

Remember the measures we are putting in place is aimed at protecting this country from the virus, which can only be brought in by people coming from infected countries. There is also the concern that while they may be free from the virus now, there is no guarantee that they will not be affected enroute to Honiara, passing through busy international airports.

While efforts to improve our capacity is ongoing, the Government is dealing with the issues of our students in the best interest of all of us. We have been assured through our diplomatic missions that our students are safe in the countries they are residing and

are advised to strictly comply with the safety measures imposed by the host countries.

For the time being the Government will provide financial assistance to our overseas students while we expand the capacity of our quarantine facilities to cater for the return of all our students studying abroad should a decision to that effect be made in consultation with the host countries at the appropriate time.

To date the Government has not received any request from these host countries to repatriate our students. I want to assure the parents and relatives of these students that the government will do everything to make our students comfortable, including options to evacuate them in consultation with the host countries.

Lock Down

I understand that some citizens have insisted that we effect a lock down now. This means that we close the borders of our designated emergency zones completely from engaging with the rest of the world and with our own citizens. Currently, the emergency zone is Honiara, where the seat of Government and commerce and industries are located.

This advice is not taken lightly because of its repercussions to the country; but it will become unavoidable at the appropriate

time. In the plan to consider this option, the government is working on our preparedness.

I want to make it clear that there is still no lock down within Solomon Islands. People are still free to move around. However, if an order is made to lock down then it means people will be prohibited from travelling between provinces and Honiara.

Therefore, I wish to encourage people who have no commitments in Honiara to travel back to their provinces while you still have the opportunity. Once a lock down is ordered all travelling to and from Honiara will be restricted. Curfews will also be imposed which will restrict the movement of people within Honiara as well.

We will have a simulated lock down drill in the coming days to test our response capacity in preparation for an actual lock down. I ask you all to listen out for further statements.

Engagement with the Private Sector, Financial Institutions and SOEs

Fellow Solomon Islanders,

We are on uncharted waters, and I understand the apprehension, fear and uncertainty that the public is feeling. This is expected,

and it is the duty of the Government to instil confidence in the public. All things considered, this is a big ask, but one which the Government will not shy away from.

Government is currently talking with the private sector, State Owned Enterprises and Financial Institution, including banks and Solomon Islands Provident Fund on ways in which they can assist our good people in this state of public emergency.

In this regard, I am happy to announce that today SIPA has delivered \$5 million dividend to support government implementation of COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan. Furthermore, I am also pleased to announce that SIPA already removed berthing fees at the domestic terminal. The immediate action taken by SIPA is one that will ease the burden to our local shipping operators.

In addition, I am also happy to announce that the Solomon power has also provided a dividend of \$5 million. They have also offered flexibility in terms of payments of outstanding Bills to larger businesses and general customers.

Finally, I am pleased to announce that the National Provident Fund will be providing the following assistance to its members:

- A sum of \$5,000 to be made available to members under the age of 50 years who are temporarily laid off and or repatriated home due to the effects of the COVID-19. Members whose balances are below \$5,000 are to be paid 50% of their balances.
- Members who are laid off due to the effects of COVID-19 be waived the 3 months waiting period and be paid 1/3 of their contribution or in full, if the balance is less than \$10,000. The remaining balance will be paid according to the SINPF schedule.
- Members who are aged 50 years and above to withdraw up to 20% of their contributions should they wish to or else they can elect to withdraw in full.
- The application of member support will be for 3 months period effective 1st April 2020 to 30 June 2020
- Exemption of Surcharges will be considered and aligned to the SINPF Board Surcharge Policy.

It is equally important that our economy continues to function with minimal disruption, and to that end the Government is in the process of putting together a stimulus package and will widely consult with all stakeholders representing the private sector in the country to assess the likely effect of a possible prolonged negative effects of the pandemic on the performance of

the economy and to agree on a way forward to mitigate the negative effects.

The Minister of Finance is also working very closely with our development and multi-lateral partners in this connection. The responses have been very encouraging.

The Government is also implementing fiscal measures to ensure financial resources are available to counter the pandemic and support local businesses during both the emergency period and the recovery phase of this global pandemic. We cannot be certain how long this pandemic will continue to threaten our country, but be rest assured that this Government will do everything in its power to safeguard our nation and people.

The Government is also implementing cost cutting measures and putting together budgetary discipline measures to free up the much needed financial resources to boost the capability of the government to strategically to protect our borders and to deal effectively with any outbreaks.

People Government Mutual Responsibility

I would also like to remind everyone that we should not create unnecessary panic by spreading rumours and speculating. That said, the Government must also be timely in its dissemination of

information. At such critical time it is very important that we are all kept informed and regularly updated.

Appreciation of Public Cooperation and Support

I also wish to acknowledge with the deepest appreciation the response that the public has demonstrated in abiding and respecting the measures that I announced earlier. It gives the Government comfort and confidence to see our people responding positively. We are one of the few countries left in the world that has no confirmed case of COVID-19. This is a testament to the good work that our officers and people are doing.

To our front liners, our first line of defence, on behalf of the Government and people of Solomon Islands I wish to convey our deepest gratitude and respect.

To your families, the Government and people of Solomon Islands are eternally grateful for providing much needed encouragement and support to our front liners.

To all those who are working hard behind the scene, your efforts have not gone unnoticed. My appreciation to you all.

To my fellow Solomon Islanders, if there is any fight that needs to be fought together by us all, it is this fight against COVID-19.

We are all in this together. Let us all work and cooperate together to fight against our common enemy, COVID-19.

In the words of Winston Churchill, "Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves, that if Solomon Islands should come out of this global pandemic unscathed, men will say, "This was their finest hour.""

Thank you all for listening.

May God Bless Solomon Islands from Shore to Shore.