

# **GOVERNMENT OF THE KINGDOM OF ESWATINI**



## **PRIME MINISTER'S STATEMENT**

### **NATIONAL COVID-19 UPDATE**

The repulsive arm of the Corona virus has tightened its grip on our country and region over the past four weeks. We have seen a huge surge of deaths and infections with figures standing at 43 deaths and 2775 positive cases as of this morning.

We continue to observe the negative effects of this virus on people with pre-existing illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, asthma and cancer, who develop severe illness, and sadly some have passed away.

May I pass our condolences to the families, relatives and friends of all the dearly departed and take this opportunity to assure Emaswati of Government's commitment to step up our response to help save the lives of our citizens.

The sharp increase of positive cases is indeed concerning and has caused anxiety among many Emaswati. This is despite of the warning we received from the Ministry of Health that we are in a flu season where viruses such as coronavirus usually thrive.

It is apparent that COVID-19 is here to stay for a bit longer than initially anticipated and we all need to stubbornly remain vigilant by strictly adhering to all health precautions that have been shared by health professionals and make sure that our elderly and those with underlying health conditions are adequately protected.

## **Health response**

Government is continuously reviewing and renewing its health response in light of global developments and health advice in order to contain the spread of the virus and save more lives. A new set of guidelines aimed at reducing deaths due to COVID-19 are being implemented by the Ministry of Health. They include;

- Improving turnaround time for COVID-19 results through offering priority testing for those with symptoms and those already severely ill and admitted at various health facilities.
- Improving care of suspected cases in regional hospitals by deploying additional equipment such as ventilators and oxygen delivering apparatus.
- Further training of health workers in the management of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and hypertension in COVID-19 cases.
- Decentralizing COVID-19 care for mild disease to other hospitals, other than the ones designated for COVID-19 care.
- Targeting home care services for those with mild COVID-19 disease, who are more at risk of progressing faster to severe disease and death.
- Promoting self-care for the asymptomatic clients

Government is continuing to avail resources for the health response, including additional ambulances, bed spaces, ventilators and oxygen apparatus.

As announced previously, a total of five Phases were designed to help us navigate through the COVID 19 response. We are currently at the upper end of Phase 3 which represents mass testing and identification of COVID 19 positive people for treatment.

### **Schools opening**

All our health intervention efforts are aimed at saving lives and preparing a seamless return to our normal way of life, including paving way for the education sector to resume full operation following the closure of schools in the month of March.

It has been exactly four weeks since high schools and tertiary institutions re-opened successfully for completing classes. Government continues to monitor the situation in opened schools to secure the safety of both teachers and students.

The Ministry of Education and Training has engaged Head Teachers to get updates on the progress and experiences of schools under the circumstances provided by the corona virus. It has been apparent during these consultations that teachers are committed to the cause of teaching despite working in what can be referred to as a “new normal.”

Government has been made aware that some teachers have contracted the virus and one teacher’s life has been lost. We convey our deep condolences to his family, the school and the

entire teaching fraternity and pray for the speedy recovery of the rest. Government remains committed to providing all the necessary tools to ensure a safe learning environment for all. We appeal to schools to work closely with the Ministry of Health in managing the school environment when a case is suspected.

Following the announcement that schools would open in a phased approach, Government has commenced a process of training Primary schools' Head teachers and Chairpersons of School Committees. In the meantime we will monitor and observe the situation in High Schools to determine when and how the next reopening phase can be implemented.

We have an obligation to ensure to ensure that schools' reopening is done with consistent and uncompromising adherence to the overall COVID 19 health guidelines to protect learners, teachers and support staff. Schools cannot remain closed indefinitely as that poses a risk to children's education, increases inequality and social cohesion, among others.

His Majesty's Government is indebted to all teachers and education stakeholders who have put the interests of their students at heart regardless of the challenges and risks they encounter each and every day. Government will continue to support schools to remain a safe environment for learning even during these trying times.

## **Economy and Business**

We also have an obligation to return our economy to the path of steady growth that had already been created pre COVID-19. The

partial lockdown which rendered most businesses closed has had a telling effect on our economy and tested the resilience of business, more especially our small business sector.

Similar to other global economies, the domestic economy has been severely affected by the corona virus pandemic. Recent global economic data has indicated massive contraction in global and domestic economic activity as economic disruptions are experienced world over. Trade disruptions, supply chain disruptions and weakened demand have been experienced as countries implemented lockdowns, shutdowns and other containment measures in a bid to mitigate the continued spread of the virus. As a result, global stock markets plummeted, global commodity prices fell, and exchange rates depreciated massively.

Preliminary data shows that Eswatini's Quarterly GDP recorded its second consecutive decline as economic activity decreased by 6.5 percent on a year on year comparison in the 2020 first quarter. This coincided with weakened demand in major advanced economies due to lockdowns. As a result, export industries and travel related sectors have been hard hit by the COVID-19 effects. The manufacturing, construction, wholesale & retail, transport and leisure sectors were the major contributors to the contraction.

The continued effects of COVID-19 on economic activity have already dented economic output from various angles. Data indicates a significant decline in economic activity due to supply and demand shocks caused by the crisis. Consequently, Eswatini's economic growth forecast for 2020 is expected to be a 6.7 percent contraction.

The impact on the fiscal position is severe as domestic revenue projections have been revised downwards due to reduced economic activity. Declines were experienced in company tax emanating from reduced company output; drop in VAT from disposable incomes and labour disruptions affecting Pay As You Earn (PAYE). On the other hand, there is increased pressure on expenditure resulting from the health sector as well as social protection sectors in response to the impact of the pandemic as the most vulnerable are at increased risk of losing incomes.

On a positive note, inflationary pressure remained subdued with inflation averaging 3.9 percent in the second quarter of 2020. On fiscal stability, Government has tackled the historical liquidity problem by pursuing E3.7 billion support from various financial institutions. These include IMF, AFREXIM, World Bank and African Development Bank. I am happy to report that the AFREXIM has approved support towards clearance of payment arrears and we are awaiting the first disbursement.

The IMF has approved US \$110.4 million loan under its Rapid Financing Instrument window. The World Bank has also extended US \$6million loan under their Emergency Facility. We are engaged with the World Bank and the African Development Bank to fully eradicate the financing gap in our 2020/21 budget of up to E2 billion. The support will improve the economic outlook, though the depressed global economic performance will still weigh heavily in on overall performance.

We are finalising a post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan in collaboration with many key stakeholders including the business sector. This is an aggressive plan that identifies the route we have to follow to achieve sustained economic growth despite the massive setbacks we have suffered in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **MSME Fund**

Government, through the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Trade has set up a MSME Revolving Fund. The fund which is to the value of E45million is targeted at assisting small and medium businesses that have been adversely affected by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Modalities and details on the Fund will be announced by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Trade in due course.

As we continue with the calculated process of opening up more businesses to return our economic activity to normalcy, we will strengthen our monitoring mechanisms to ensure that the business environment is safe for both workers and clients.

Over 1 300 businesses have been inspected by the Ministry of Commerce with the support of Regional Administrators, Police and the National Disaster Management Agency for compliance to COVID-19 regulations. While a majority of businesses are complying adequately with the COVID-19 health guidelines, it is very disappointing to note that some businesses deliberately flout the rules.

Inspections have revealed that some businesses, particularly in rural areas, fail to provide proper sanitation stations, do not enforce the wearing of face masks, do not have social distance markings and sell expired goods. Other businesses are still inflating prices for commodity goods such as maize meal, rice and sugar, amongst others. Government has taken the necessary steps to close businesses that have been found to be in conflict with the regulations. We wish to strongly advise against such flagrant disregard of the COVID-19 regulations as this does not only put the lives of Eswatini at risk but also manipulates consumers at a time when we should all be united to mitigate the effects of COVID-19. We will continue to charge and close all businesses that do not respect the health and wellbeing of Eswatini.

## **Relief assistance**

The impact of the virus on the livelihoods of the vulnerable has been severe over the past six months. It is for this reason that Government has initiated a number of interventions to soften the blow and lessen the devastating effects of the pandemic on the livelihoods of Eswatini. Thousands of our citizens have lost jobs, leaving them with no food on the table. Government began a food distribution and cash transfer exercise in May which has now reached more than 347,400 beneficiaries from 67,700 households. This assistance will continue for the next two months as resources have already been secured. We remain grateful to the Kirsh Foundation for the generous donation extended to Eswatini in support of this government initiative.



Government has also rehabilitated an additional 26 boreholes, dug 11 new boreholes and revamped five reticulated schemes to provide clean water to more than 14,000 Emaswati across the country. Our rural communities will reap the benefits of such an investment for a long time after COVID-19.

## **Agriculture**

The COVID 19 pandemic has amplified our objective of being a food secure and food sufficient Nation. We owe it to ourselves to increase production levels especially in agriculture.

As the country remains on partial lockdown, the demand for food has continued to rise. Food prices are also following the same trend. Our bodies require healthy and nutritious food for nourishment and strength to fight infections.

In this regard, Emaswati are encouraged to engage in serious agricultural production activities for both commercial and subsistence purposes. This will go a long way towards ensuring food security and income generation to cater for other household needs. We are all encouraged to have small nutrition gardens and livestock production units within our households.

The rainy season is now approaching and it marks the beginning of the ploughing season. It is in our prayers that the country will be blessed with adequate rains to sustain our crops in the upcoming season. The Ministry of Agriculture has already started preparations for the ploughing season and farmers are encouraged to prepare themselves to engage in agricultural production,

particularly for food crops like grains and vegetables which are an essential part of our daily diet.

Experts in the various fields of agriculture are available on various communication platforms and are ready to assist farmers with services and information they may require as they engage in their production activities. Agriculture provides a great platform for self sustenance especially at a time when jobs themselves are constantly being threatened by this pandemic.

### **Laid Off workers Relief Fund**

The process of paying workers who were temporarily laid off without pay from the E25million Relief Fund is proceeding successfully. Currently compensatory relief claims have been paid to 8238 employees who were laid off without pay. The amount paid out so far is E3, 358, 800.

It is encouraging to note that with the gradual relaxation of the partial lockdown, the number of employers applying to temporarily lay off their employees is decreasing, signalling that business is slowly getting back to normal. As business gets back to normal we advise that workers and employers remain vigilant in observing all health precautions to prevent a spread of new COVID 19 infections. Employers who have still not claimed for their laid off workers are urged to approach the Ministry of Labour and Social Security for the necessary assistance so that every eligible employee can benefit from this Fund.

### **Gatherings**

It is without doubt that gatherings remain a magnet for the spread of the coronavirus and the importance of adhering to all health precautions and protocols cannot be over emphasised. While Government has allowed an increased number of people to attend religious gatherings, weddings, funerals and public meetings under strict conditions, we urge Emaswati to remain on guard by strictly avoiding behaviour that will leave them vulnerable to the virus. Large gatherings, night vigils, house parties and selling of alcohol remains banned. Our security forces are working closely with emergency teams to enforce strict adherence to all established preventive measures.

## **Health precautions**

May I encourage all Emaswati to support the health sector in reducing the spread of coronavirus in our families and communities. We all have an individual responsibility to protect ourselves and each other.

Individuals can play a significant role in curbing the spread of the coronavirus by, among others;

- Wearing a mask properly to cover the nose and mouth at all times, especially in public.
- Limiting movement and large gatherings in community events and meetings since this provides a fertile ground for the easy spread of the coronavirus from person to person.
- Hand sanitation still remains the fundamental strategy of preventing the spread of COVID-19. Let us not under-

estimate the role of our hands in transmitting many diseases and in particular, the spread of coronavirus.

- Observing social distancing at all times and especially when using public transport. We appeal to all public transport owners to strictly adhere to the transport guidelines or face losing their transport permits.

## **Conclusion**

As I conclude, may I on behalf of His Majesty's Government recognise the untiring efforts and commitment of all frontline workers. Without their courage and determination to face this enemy without retreat, we would not have reached this far with our heads still on our shoulders. The battle is not yet over and we will continue to support them to help us overcome this menace which has derailed our growth plans.

We remain encouraged by the counsel and support of Their Majesty throughout the implementation of our response interventions. Our resolve to overcome this virus continues to be tested but our determination to make it through these rough terrain remains strong uncompromising.

The onus is on all of us to stay vigilant and refuse to be drawn to any behavior that will reverse the gains we have made in the middle of the COVID-19 storm.

There is no doubt that in unity of purpose and with full compliance to all COVID 19 health protocols we will soon find our way out of this trying situation.

Thank you.

**Ambrose Mandvulo Dlamini**  
**PRIME MINISTER**  
**KINGDOM OF ESWATINI**

**03 AUGUST 2020**