

GOVERNMENT OF THE KINGDOM OF ESWATINI



PRIME MINISTER'S STATEMENT

NATIONAL COVID-19 UPDATE

The Kingdom of Eswatini has not yet shaken off the shackles of the coronavirus, almost six months after the first positive case was confirmed in the country. We have observed, over the past three months, a substantial growth in the number of infections and deaths, notwithstanding the encouraging number of recoveries. As of this morning, we have recorded 4780 infections and 94 deaths due to COVID 19.

We have not yet reached a point of a consistent decline in the number of infections. The number of deaths due to the corona virus continues to rise and needs to be curtailed to save lives. This is not a phenomenon unique to Eswatini as we have noticed a new wave of infections in countries that had started to experience and steady decline. This therefore means we need to remain vigilant as Emaswati to be able to win this battle which is testing our determination and willpower.

Education

As the negative effects of COVID-19 continue to loom large in our country and globally, we are under no illusion that despite the challenges, we need to protect the future of our children by giving them the opportunity to continue with their education. Government has taken a cautious approach to the reopening of schools over the past two months. Over the past two weeks, Form 3 and Grade 7 students returned to class under strict guidelines. The Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Ministry of Health is closely monitoring the safety of children in schools as more students get back to class. All the necessary health precautions are being observed and implemented to ensure the safety of teachers and students at all times.

May I implore learners to fully dedicate themselves to their school work throughout the process of catching up with lessons and preparing for examinations which are getting closer by the day. To cover for lost instructional time, Government has readjusted the school calendar. Examination timetables have already been circulated to all schools.

Government continues to support the re-opening phases through the payment of Free Primary Education (FPE) and Orphaned and Vulnerable Children's (OVC) grants. We acknowledge that the process has, in some instances, been slow but Government continues to meet this obligation of supporting our children and the education sector.

We recognise the dedication of all teachers and education stakeholders in ensuring a seamless return to class for students and for the extra efforts of helping them prepare for examinations.

Relief Assistance & Economic Recovery Plan

His Majesty's Government is also continuing with the implementation of relief programmes to mitigate the impact of this pandemic on the lives of Eswatini. More than 360 000 Eswatini from over 70 000 households have received cash to purchase food. At least E7 million has been paid to laid off workers through the Layoff Relief Fund, and over 100 boreholes and rural water schemes have been rehabilitated to create access to potable water for families. We are cognisant of the fact that relief assistance is not enough to satisfy or reach all citizens in need. We need to find sustainable solutions that will cushion Eswatini from similar disasters in the future and to achieve national food security and consistent economic growth.

It is against this background that last month government launched a post COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan to accelerate our economic growth endeavors. The success of this E30 billion Plan rests in the support of all Eswatini. We all share the responsibility of turning the fortunes of our country and ensure that our economy works for all as per the command of His Majesty King Mswati III.

Early rainfall projections for the coming season indicate that we may have normal to above normal rain in most parts of Southern Africa. Government appeals to all Eswatini to start making the necessary preparations for the ploughing season. We have an

obligation as a nation to achieve sustainable food security. Government will continue to provide subsidized agriculture inputs to farming families to ensure food security.

Health & Alcohol consumption

We have been consistently educated that COVID-19 is transmitted when people come into direct contact with one another. This can be in such settings as Households, Businesses, Schools and Gatherings. The opening up of the economy to allow a resumption of a new normal raises the risk of increasing the prevalence of the virus. Clearly, caution must be taken as more decisions are made to further unlock the economy, taking into consideration the risk and benefit trade-offs.

Reports from teams conducting case investigation have shown clusters of COVID-19 cases that are related to group alcohol consumption episodes, where some people have gone to the extent of sharing one drinking container. It is worth noting that Eswatini is among countries identified to have high per capita consumption of alcohol globally, estimated to be at 9.9 liters per capita compared to a global average of 6.4 liters per capita, according to a WHO report of 2018. High alcohol consumption levels among the population presents a risk of undoing the gains we have made in enforcing non-medical prevention interventions in the country.

Health experts have informed us that continued drinking of alcohol results in multiple effects in the body, which may result in poor

outcomes for those infected with COVID-19 due to the following effects of alcohol in the human body:

- Alcohol has both short-term and long-term effects on almost every single organ of the body and the risk of damage to health increases with each drink consumed.
- Alcohol use, especially heavy use, weakens the immune system and thus reduces the ability to cope with infectious diseases such as COVID-19.
- Alcohol alters thoughts, judgement, decision-making and behaviour all which are required for people to take safety precautions to Covid-19.
- Heavy use of alcohol increases the risk of acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), one of the most severe complications of COVID-19.
- Additionally most people prefer to drink in groups and in areas without sufficient space or ventilation, such as bars and it is impossible to wear masks and drink alcohol, or even practise social distancing, which further increases the possibility of transmitting COVID-19.

Our long-term projections had predicted a peak in July and a potential increase in cases in November depending on the level of adherence to prevention guidelines especially social distancing protocols. As much as the data may soon begin to show a declining trend in the number of new COVID-19 cases, this may be short-lived if alcohol consumption is re-introduced. We need to attain less than 50 active cases to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 through gatherings. Currently we have more than 700 active cases. Of concern is the high rate of deaths which now stands at around 2%, and among the highest in the region.

It is for these reasons that Government has taken the decision to extend the ban of alcohol production and sales to the local market. A review to determine whether the sale of alcohol can be allowed in October will be made at the end of September. That decision will be informed by the behaviour of this highly unpredictable virus over the course this month.

When alcohol selling is eventually allowed, it will be implemented in a phased approach that introduces limits in the number of litres sold by retailers. The intention is to lower the number of litres of alcohol consumed per capita during this COVID-19 pandemic period. Government will continue engaging all stakeholders in the business of selling alcohol to minimise the economic impact of such a tough yet necessary decision.

All our attempts to achieve a considerable and sustained decline in new COVID-19 deaths and infections will yield to nothing if we do not collectively adhere to all health guidelines and precautions to contain the spread of the virus.

Conclusion

This is indeed an unprecedented period in our history, a time when a virus is threatening the way of life as we are used to, and a time when our resolve and resilience as a nation is put to the utmost test. Like in any battle, a lot of sacrifice has to be made in order to emerge victorious. United we will come out of the dark channels of this enemy with our heads high. We will look back at this challenging era with the conviction that nothing can defeat us when we move in tandem with one major goal and objective.

Government highly appreciates the continued guidance and support of Their Majesties. They have consistently been a pillar of strength and a source of inspiration and unyielding support in these trying times.

Our frontline workers have relentlessly held fort in testing times, and for that we are grateful. Government commits to continue supporting them to efficiently perform their duties and ensuring that they have the necessary tools and equipment to remain protected from infection.

I do not doubt that the end is not very far because nothing lasts forever, and that as a nation we will collectively put the virus in its rightful place of history.

Thank you.

Ambrose Mandvulo Dlamini
PRIME MINISTER
KINGDOM OF ESWATINI

05 September 2020