

Address to the nation by His Excellency the President, Cde Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic

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Fellow Zimbabweans,

In the wake of the coronavirus which is now a global pandemic, and thus a concern for all nations and all peoples of the world, we as Zimbabwe have to play our part.

We have worked out a comprehensive response strategy, buttressed by strong measures which ensure we remain protected and secure as a nation, and in step with appropriate measures being taken by the rest of the world.

While we are relieved that our country is still free from this virus which continues to spread elsewhere across persons, communities, countries and continents, we stand in full solidarity with all peoples and nations of the world so far affected by the pandemic. Nations of the world have to stand together as one.

Already, many lives have been lost; many more people have succumbed or are unwell; precious resources are being diverted towards the control and containment of the pandemic.

We are under no illusion that what befalls our global neighbours today may eventually hit us and also affect our communities tomorrow. We thus must join hands with the rest of the world in tackling this pandemic collectively, even before it crosses our own border.

We have to take preventive steps and all precautions that are necessary. We have to be ready with remedial interventions in case of actual outbreaks. Indeed, we have to have a National Response Plan for containing the pandemic once it reaches us.

Dear Zimbabweans,

What makes the problem even more challenging is that more still needs to be known about this virus whose spread within and between communities, countries, regions and continents, is proving very rapid and exponential.

Humanity is at risk and stands at hazardous crossroads.

Worldwide, the pandemic's impact on national health systems has been enormous. Even developed health systems feel the strain; those of fragile, developing economies are struggling to cope. The trans-border trajectory of the virus thus makes us all neighbours, turn us all into each other's keepers. Above all, it recommends global partnerships across old divides that may have set us apart. We now have to join hands against this global threat, while acting in unison within our immediate national neighbourhoods.

To date, national responses have been varied, with nations most affected or at greatest risk taking drastic, even draconian measures.

These include complete lock-down of communities, towns and cities, in order to contain and check the spread of the virus.

The social and psychological toll on communities has been unimaginable. Yet those measures are necessary.

Impact on national economies, on international relations, and on trade, has been severe and continue to escalate daily. Today signs of national and global economic recession and crises are already in evidence. We thus have to act decisively.

In our case, we have seen key bilateral projects in many sectors, most notably in transport and infrastructures, either being slowed down or coming to a complete halt. Travel and tourism has taken a knock from curtailed human movements, in our case on the back of two successive droughts. While we have no recorded cases as yet, the economic impact of the pandemic is already being felt, threatening our Vision 2030.

The key challenge we all face is balancing effective measures that are necessary and have to be taken, against the need to ensure our societies and economies continue to function optimally for common, collective good. This is no easy balance.

Government has been seized with this matter for quite some time and our response and state of readiness to date has included the following measures:

1 Creating Systems for National Alertness and rapid response to any suspected cases of the virus;

1 Strengthening screening and testing capacities both at various ports of entry, and inside the country for early detection and rapid responses;

1 Creating isolation centres where suspected cases are examined and/or treated safely;

1 Contact tracing and screening to guard against the spread through into-country infections and in-country transmissions;

1 Reinforcing National Health Systems and institutional framework for an effective response;

1 Improving community hygiene awareness and citizen action, including self-isolation and voluntary travel bans;

1 Information dissemination and general national awareness;

1 Creating a Special Fund to enhance measures against the pandemic;

1 Transnational cooperation and collaboration in line with World Health Organisation rules, regulations and pronouncements;

1 In our small way, encouraging interdisciplinary research into this pandemic for a more scientific understanding of the problem.

Dear Citizens, the pandemic has reached our region and we now have to escalate our national response. Above all, we must readjust our lives and behaviours, including foregoing certain fixtures, activities and practices we had grown accustomed to, in order to keep the pandemic at bay. This holds true at all levels: personal, community and national.

Today, Government deliberated on this looming threat, and has decided to take additional measures to ensure that our national response is effective, comprehensive and complete.

1. Government has decided that the coronavirus pandemic be declared a State of National Disaster.

This allows Government to mobilise resources and take necessary measures in dealing with the pandemic. With immediate effect and for a unified and coordinated effort, I have directed that our National Disaster

Management Machinery extend its mandate and focus to deal with the pandemic, with the Ministry of Health and Child Care as the lead agency.

Weekly reports will have to be made to Cabinet. We thank our local, bilateral, international and multilateral partners for offering a helping hand, including additional funding, training, and the upgrading and equipping of designated Health Facilities for effective response.

2. As already announced, Government has curtailed unnecessary travel outside the country, especially to destinations in countries affected by the virus. That position remains in force.

Travellers from high risk countries are encouraged to postpone their travel arrangements to Zimbabwe for the next 30 days, starting from 20th March, 2020.

Equally, Zimbabweans are discouraged from travelling to, through and from high risk countries during the same period. Non essential travel must be avoided or discouraged by all of us;

3. While all our major entry ports into the country will remain operational, screening, testing and other WHO recommended measures will be enforced vigorously.

All designated small border crossings will stand closed from now until further notice;

4. Similarly, Government is working within WHO Guidelines in handling and treating guests from other countries as they come into our country to stay with us. We continue to review this as necessary, and strictly on the basis of available scientific evidence and information. Our response will neither be arbitrary nor reckless.

5. To reduce the likelihood of infections and the spread of the coronavirus, Government has now put all Hospitals and Health Facilities on High Alert for COVID-19. Kits and other accessories for screening, handling, testing and treatment continue to be availed. More isolation and treatment centres are being identified, designated and equipped appropriately;

6. Government has decided to postpone, curtail or cancel public events, gatherings and activities. In that respect, Government has postponed the Zimbabwe International Trade Fair, ZITF, all National Independence celebrations previously planned, and pending international sporting fixtures until the threat of coronavirus recedes. All these activities will resume as soon as we are satisfied that our nation is no longer at risk. Resources originally earmarked for these events will now be redirected towards strengthening our defences against the coronavirus, and towards drought mitigation. Gatherings of more than 100 people, including those for purposes of worship and weddings stand suspended for the next 60 days after which the suspension will be reviewed;

7. We must continue to heighten our vigilance, always acting with care, consideration and compassion. Individuals presenting clinical symptoms of the virus must come forward for tests and attention, including embarking on voluntary social distancing and submitting to all other control measures deemed necessary, for the collective good;

8. With immediate effect, all Government premises must be equipped for screening procedures. In the same spirit, Government encourages businesses and other establishments to do the same so our response is total and effective. Personal hygiene and the use of alcohol based sanitisers must be encouraged in all situations. Luckily, we have capacity to manufacture these sanitisers locally.

9. In view of the fact that schools are only two weeks away from end of the first term, Government has decided to keep them open, with standard screening precautions being taken daily.

Dates for reopening of all schools will be announced, taking into account realities on the ground;

10. A National Communication Taskforce on the virus, and for disseminating accurate information and raising general national awareness on the pandemic will be immediately constituted.

Should the situation escalate, Government will not hesitate to take further and even more drastic measures for our common good.

Going forward, our monthly National Clean-Up Exercise must, henceforth incorporate heightened awareness on the virus, including measures which experts recommend to ensure highest standards of public health.

Fellow Zimbabweans,

Now is the time to show unity and purpose in our nation. We have to reach out to one another in fighting this deadly pandemic.

It knows no political party; no ideological boundary; no colour; no creed, no nationality. We either unite in fighting it, or it forces us together in shared grief.

The choice is that stark, and ours to make.

That choice has to be made now while there is still time.

I count on your full support so we work towards a virus-free Zimbabwe.

I thank you and Good Day.