

COVID-19: ECOWAS Ministerial Coordinating Committee Recommends Gradual and Coordinated Opening of Borders

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Abuja, 17th, June, 2020. The ECOWAS Ministerial Coordination Committee on Transport, Logistics and Trade has made recommendations on the harmonized and gradual re-opening of land, air and sea borders for restoring cross border economic activities, especially for movement of humanitarian personnel, medical supplies and equipment and essential goods in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

The recommendations were adopted for submission to the Co-Chairpersons of the ad-hoc Ministerial Committee, Honorable Minister of Aviation for the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Senator Hadi Sirika and President of the ECOWAS Commission H.E Jean-Claude Kassi Brou for onward submission to President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and champion of the regional COVID-19 response H E Muhammadu Buhari, for the subsequent presentation to the Summit of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government.

The Ministers discussed and agreed on practical modalities based on the report of the regional experts meeting held virtually on 8th and 10th June, 2020 as well as the draft Guidelines for the *Harmonization and Facilitation of Cross Border Trade & Transport in the ECOWAS Region on The Covid-19 Pandemic and Related Post-Recovery Actions*.

After their deliberations which took place on the 12th and 16th of June, 2020, the Ministers recommended a gradual and coordinated opening of land borders and airports of ECOWAS Member States based on health data on the evolution of the pandemic and called for the appropriate fiscal measures by governments to support the effective implementation of the guidelines.

According to the meeting's report, the opening of the borders is to be hinged on the proposed Guidelines for the mitigation of health risks and the harmonization and facilitation of cross-border trade and transport in the ECOWAS region in the context of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, amounting to a coordinated and progressive opening of air, land and maritime borders.

They also held that the reopening has become imperative in view of the need to revive the economies of ECOWAS member countries.

The Ministers recommended a three-phased approach to the opening of land and air borders beginning with local internal domestic air and land transport within ECOWAS Member States, then a second phase which involves the opening of land and air borders between ECOWAS Member States, to allow the free movement of goods and persons on the basis of strict application of the proposed guidelines for the harmonization and facilitation of cross-border trade and transport in the ECOWAS region.

Following a review of the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic in respective Member States, a third phase of opening air and land borders to other countries with low and controlled levels (according to WHO classifications) of COVID-19 contamination rates will be pursued.

The Ministers further called for accurate information sharing on opening-up measures among Member States in the spirit of solidarity, collective self-reliance and inter-State co-operation through bilateral and multilateral consultations. They also called for the need to ensure speedy and safer clearance of transit goods at the borders and minimize physical contact in customs, cross-border trade transactions through the rapid deployment of the new ECOWAS Interconnected Goods and Transit Management System popularly termed SIGMAT.

They also urged the provision of such information to private sector actors namely shipping lines, Airlines, cross-border transporters and traders, media and civil society while ensuring strong collaboration at borders among control agencies for the establishment of arrangements to control travelers regarding the COVID-19.

Owing to the need to ensure an effective coordination mechanism to follow-up implementation of the guidelines at both national and regional levels, the Ministers called for the use of existing state or regional structures and committees responsible for ensuring the proper application of the protocols on free movement on Community corridors and borders of national and regional trade, among others.

The Ministerial Coordinating Committee, chaired by Nigeria's Aviation Minister Senator Hadi Sirika, made a plea for "strong and determined support for the ownership and implementation of the guidelines" once adopted by the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government.

Apart from ministers from Member States, the meeting was also attended by the ECOWAS Commission's Commissioner for Infrastructure, Mr. Pathé Gueye and his counterpart for Trade, Customs & Free Movement, Mr. Konzi Tei, the Director General of the West African Health Organization (WAHO), Professor Stanley Okolo as well as the Commissioner in charge of Community Spatial Planning and Transport at the Commission of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), Mr. Paul Koffi Koffi.

For more information and updates on COVID-19 across the West African Region, visit our website: <https://www.ecowas.int/covid-19/>

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