



THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION
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M E M O R A N D U M

TO: Dr the Honourable Keith Rowley,
Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

FROM: The Honourable Kamla Persad-Bissessar, SC, MP,
Leader of the Opposition

DATE: 20 March 2020

RE: The Opposition's suggestions for consideration in the fight against Covid-19

The Opposition recognizes the need for collaboration to deal with the threat of the Covid-19 viral disease.

This crisis is unprecedented, and we are happy that the Government has shown its willingness to put aside partisan instincts and work in the interests of the people of our nation.

The Opposition has already done a lot on our own, but I made this offer to the Government because the ideas we have would add great value to overall efforts.

As a responsible Opposition, we have developed recommendations to assist in the fight.

Actions the Opposition is taking

In this time of uncertainty, there is a great deal of misinformation that is feeding the panic. We in the Opposition understand the fear, and so we have started reaching out to citizens, sharing information from official sources in an effort to increase awareness.

The party has also implemented policies at our Head Office, at the offices of the Members of Parliament, Councillors, and all party offices, to protect staff as well as members of the public who visit these areas.

In addition, we have suspended party activities and public gatherings, as social distancing is recommended as one measure to inhibit the spread of the disease.

And, we've initiated virtual meetings to keep those lines of communications and engagement open.

Our Concerns:

The Opposition calls for greater clarity and transparency, and urge the Government to ensure full transparency and accountability to the population on the extent and impact of Covid-19.

Some of our concerns include the cost and source of Government Financing, as well as issues with testing and the readiness of our health sector, as outlined below.

Cost and Source of Government Financing

- How does the Government propose to finance the bailout measures?
- What is the current amount in the HSF, given that it has been impacted by the stock market crash?
- Is the Government exploring funding from the CAF, World Bank and IDB, and considered the consequences of that in the medium and long term?
- We support the reduction of reserve requirement for Banks and the drop in interest rates, reduced rate on credit cards, the injection of \$100m US more of foreign exchange, the increase in allowable credit card amounts, the principle of moratorium on loan and mortgage payment.
- However, it is our view that the banks need to be more flexible than skip a payment. What will happen when the payments accumulate? The current measures, in our view, do not guarantee comprehensive business survival and protection of jobs in the small and medium sized businesses.
- Clarity is needed on what support will be given to businesses, like bars that are being asked to close? What support to restaurants whose customers cannot dine on location?
- How will they manage in this crisis? It is not just loans, but income and jobs. Especially the small independent outfits in both urban and rural settings. Local small businesses, not just franchise chains, must be helped to survive.
- We would like the government to share the scenarios that they may have worked out with different permutations of oil and gas prices.
- What is going to be the source of funds for food and drug imports and the approximate costs required?
- What is going to be the source of funds for VAT repayments and other payables for the business and contracting sectors?

- What is the state of the refinanced Petrotrin loans now taken over by Heritage since this involves bond financing?
- In the current circumstances, what is the state of play with Patriotic over the sale of the Petrotrin refinery?

Equipment and testing

- Clarity is needed for the vast number of citizens who remain confused and concerned as to where to call, or proceed to, or to stay at home when they have some of the symptoms ascribed to COVID-19.
- The hotlines promised over two weeks ago to answer the above are still not properly operative.
- The contact numbers of Medical Personnel to provide advice, e.g. County Medical Officers of Health, District Medical Officers, Health Centres, Hospitals are generally unavailable to citizens.
- These should be published and advertised in a manner that ensures that they effectively and rapidly reach the public.
- There are several questions still to be answered on the criteria for eligibility for testing. Citizens with symptoms are told they would not be tested if there is no history of related or contact with someone who has travelled.
- Grossly insufficient Testing Kits – 3,000 for the entire Caribbean including Trinidad and Tobago.
- Insufficient HazMat and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for Health Frontline Professionals, Doctors, Nurses, Paramedics, Attendants, Ambulance Staff, etc.
- Twenty-two Ventilators at the Couva Hospital are grossly insufficient depending on the severity of the spread and incidence of Senior Citizens and even younger ones requiring Ventilatory and Intensive Care Unit support.
- Do we have sufficient Intensive Care Doctors and Nurses to provide the care in the Intensive Care Units?
- Do we have the necessary apparatus, equipment and drugs needed for the management of patients being Ventilated?
- Are there any plans to provide Military-type Hospital Rooms for care and Management if the number of citizens needing hospital-care goes beyond the existing 250 beds (role of the 50-bed Augustus Long Hospital)?
- Is the Government considering procuring Interferon Alfa 2B and other Antiviral drugs, which are presently found to reduce the severity of the disease?

- Is the Govt willing to revise the regulations to allow private medical labs to do testing for the virus, if not immediately, then for the long term?

THE OPPOSITION'S PROPOSALS:

Our Plan, which has 5 pillars, is based on mitigating the difficulties which we have seen the international community face:

1. Protecting the Vulnerable
2. Protecting the Economy
3. Protection of our citizens social net & standard of living
4. Ensuring our Medical Response follows International Best Practice
5. Rebuilding our future as we ease out of the crisis.

Recommendations:

Pillar One - Protecting the Vulnerable

Globally, we have seen the alarming and detrimental effect COVID-19 has had on the elderly population. We have seen severe impacts with “Care homes” and “Homes for the aged” throughout the world, especially in Italy.

As a result, we call on the Government to institute proper measures and regulations to ensure those who run these homes implement proper steps to protect the elderly in their care.

We ask that Government through the Ministry of Finance and the Banking sector work to assist the elderly in cashing their pension cheques and other grants without exposing them to the threat of COVID-19.

We ask that the Government work with the Ministry of Public Utilities to create a way to ensure that elderly don't have to choose between paying a bill or risking their health and that strategic plans be created to facilitate them at this time. The Minister should also move to deal with critical water shortages in several areas.

Pillar Two - Protecting the Economy

We call on the government, in addition to the measures already announced, to implement measures aimed at cushioning the effects on small businesses, employment and the economy.

Government should consider making grants available to small businesses in addition to those which already exist as a way of ensuring cash to keep them running and workers paid.

Government may want to consider a tax holiday on Business Levy and Green Fund contributions given that the profits of many businesses will be impacted.

Government may want to consider a reduction or deferral on utility payments for micro and small businesses that have seen revenue severely depleted as a result of reduced operations.

Government may want to consider concessions on import duties for those importing essential goods such as food, medication, medical supplies and other essential items.

With the price of oil at US \$20.00 per barrel this country is in a state of turmoil. Our debt is over \$120 B or thereabouts. We need an immediate moratorium from our international and domestic lenders on our external debt and internal debt. Immediate discussions should therefore take place between these lending agencies inclusive of the IMF, World Bank and IADB.

We need an immediate and short-term agricultural policy measure to address our country's food security needs. We should use this time when our economy is relatively cut off to ramp up production, strengthen agro processing linkages and build capacity. Resources for capacity building and institutional strengthening can be directed to the ADB and NAMDEVCO.

There will be an impact on food imports and the looming food shortages in this country which may lead to looting and banditry as citizens hunt for food supplies. We need to incentivize farmers and prospective to plant specific food crops now!

Government will want to consider utilizing the Agricultural Development Bank (ADB) to provide support for Farmers to ensure that food production could be ramped up to compensate for any food shortages which may occur.

None of the promises of tax-exempt imports to Agricultural producers made in the 2020 budget is in effect. The Government should move to have these fully implemented.

Pillar 3 - Protection of the social safety net & standard of living

We are calling on the Government in addition to the protections offered to renters of the HDC to also consider following the steps of the United Kingdom and other nations by enacting legislation which will temporarily protect evictions and new possession proceedings for tenants during the next three months as we cope with the economic downturn.

We call on the Government through the Ministry of Labour to introduce a "Work from home"/ Remote work Policy as well as proper rotations which will reduce the spread of COVID-19. In this endeavour, the Government should consider the creation of a suggested framework to utilise technology for remote access and work to ensure productivity is not severely affected.

We call on the Government to work with Local Government Bodies to protect the homeless as if ignored they can contribute to the spread of COVID-19.

We call on the Government to work with Local Government Bodies to ensure that streets, markets, public places such as bus stops are properly sanitized on a daily basis.

We call on the Government to reconsider its policy on allowing students to take laptops home. This is important for students to be able to maintain study during the time schools are closed.

Pillar 4 - Ensuring our Medical Response follows International Best Practice

The only way we can combat the spread of COVID-19 and **reduce the curve** is by following the measures set out by the World Health Organisation.

We encourage the government to expand its testing program by ensuring all suspected cases are thoroughly tested and monitored as dictated by the Director General of the WHO that “You cannot fight a fire blindfolded and we cannot stop this pandemic if we don't know who is infected. We have a simple message for all countries: **test, test, test.**” (especially for health professionals on the front line)

We encourage the government to look at the South Korea Model of having mobile testing stations so as to allow for a more proactive form of detection. In addition, there are many private certified laboratories in this country that should be allowed to test citizens and report accordingly for Covid-19.

We encourage the government to follow our Caricom counterparts and allocate more resources to procuring proper PPE which would be provided to all Medical Practitioners and members of the Protective Services who have a critical role to play.

We encourage the government through the Ministry of Health to undertake daily media briefings with the public so as to maintain a sense of calm while keeping with their national responsibility towards transparency.

We encourage the Government to effectively inform the population to not use Non-Steroidal Anti Inflammatory drugs (N.S.A.I.D.S.) e.g. Aspirin, Ibuprofen, Advil, Cataflam, Voltaren, Olfen etc and also Steroids since scientifically the research is showing that with the use of these drugs, the disease process seriously worsens as evidenced in Italy and in Europe, and to administer PARACETAMOL (Lancet Journal)

The Opposition has a vast network of health care professionals, who are available to provide advice and voluntary service as required.

We offer voluntary support to assist with hotlines in the Opposition constituencies and corporations to supplement official hotlines.

We commit to continue the public education via virtual meetings by our medical professionals to reinforce official messages and **to help debunk misinformation.**

Pillar 5 - Rebuilding our future as we ease out of the crisis

While the Global community is unsure as to the end of this pandemic, it is key that we in Trinidad and Tobago work to ensure that our economy and key sectors are “well - oiled” to help our economic recovery when the COVID-19 crisis comes to an end.

We therefore call on the Government to re-formulate a National tripartite committee which will monitor the effects of this crisis as it goes on, subsequently being able to properly report on the damage done to the labour market.

Measures ought to be examined immediately to address the needs of the unemployed, the homeless and the self-employed all of whom would state intervention while this crisis lasts.

We call on the Government to convene the Energy Committee of Parliament to recommend ways which we can withstand the significant vulnerability in the energy sector so as to return to prosperity.

We call on the Government to convene a special committee of Heads of Chambers, Businessmen and Opposition Members to create a medium term and long term Revenue plan to ensure our nation has never avenues to tap into as the COVID-19 crisis ends, thereby stabilizing our economy.

Government should get NFM to reduce the cost of flour, oil and rice they supply or consider the removal of VAT from some essential food items.

Other

We ask that the legislation that requires Opposition support be shared at the earliest, and that we are given an opportunity for input into those Bills before they are laid in Parliament. We want those Bills to be laid after mutual agreement on the version to be laid.

Further, consideration should be given to suspending the Parliament until April 30, 2020. It can be reconvened only for urgent business related to Covid-19.

Conclusion

In this time of crisis our nation needs to stand united. We have seen around the world where those on opposite sides have come together to work in the best interests of their citizens, countries and the global wellbeing.

We in the Opposition stand ready, willing and able to assist with the national effort to ensure our citizens' safety and health are protected.

We call on the Government to take every available step in ensuring our people are protected, our economy is protected, and we are able to survive this crisis.

Kamla Persad-Bissessar, S.C., M.P.
Leader of the Opposition