Press Release from the Office of the Prime Minister on the State of Emergency declared by the President of Vanuatu

26 March 2020

On 26 March 2020 the President of Vanuatu signed a declaration for a State of Emergency (SOE) over the whole of Vanuatu for the next two weeks for purposes of strengthening prevention and containment measures in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. This press release explains its implications and the key priorities of the government at this moment.

The nature of the emergency demands extreme prevention. The SOE provides the mechanism for the Government to immediately start the necessary actions to respond to the potential spreading of COVID-19 in Vanuatu. The SOE allows the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) to work with all sectors and other stakeholders, including the private sector, to start implementing the response strategies and plans in the event of different scenarios.

To provide certainty about the daily life implications of the SOE, Council of Ministers issued the State of Emergency Regulation Order No. 35 of 2020, which:

- **Prohibits social gatherings of more than 5 people.**
- **Prohibits all business to operate after 7:30 p.m.** (including retail and wholesale shops, kava bars, night clubs, casinos, bars and restaurants).
  
  The prohibition **does not apply to essential services** including (but not limited to): medical or paramedical services, utility services, radio services, telecommunication services, television services and security services.
- **Prohibits all public transport and fuel stations to operate after 9:00 p.m.**
- **Prohibits all media outlets to publish any articles on COVID-19**, unless it has the respective authorization by NDMO after consultation with the Ministry of Health (MOH).

It is therefore crucial for the general public to understand that the **SOE is not a shutdown of businesses. Retail shops should not be closing. All businesses can operate every day during the SOE until 7:30 p.m.**

**Government offices remain operating as usual.** All civil servants have the possibility to take outstanding annual leave, however this will be only upon full assessment of service community and approval by DGs or Directors. Staff on annual leave are required to be contactable in case they need to be recalled to work. To be clear, Government offices are not closing.
All businesses and Government offices must have a Business Continuity Plan in place and implemented that allows for the continuation of the service provision to the general public in compliance with good hygiene practices and social distancing as recommended by MOH.

National Disaster Committee and NDMO may give further direction whenever necessary on each of the above provisions.

The Government of Vanuatu is acting responsibly to face the emergency. We are working together to prepare for, respond to and recover from this global pandemic. If we work together and heed the important health messages on washing hands, social and physical distancing, and other recommendations from the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organisation (WHO) – we will get through this. We must remain calm and be more vigilant, because we need to approach this global pandemic with a clear conscience and we need to do it in a unified manner.

At present, Vanuatu remains as having zero suspected cases and zero confirmed cases of COVID-19. As MOH informed, six samples were sent to New Caledonia for testing on 25 March and the result came back negative the next day. Nevertheless, the increasing number of cases in Australia (2,318, as of 25 March 2020) and New Zealand (205, as of 25 March 2020) remains a concern for the entire South Pacific region. So far, there are also confirmed cases in French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Guam, Fiji and PNG.

The responsible authorities are continuing to enhance surveillance response measures and awareness activities to prevent and prepare for any possible outbreaks. In the event that a case is detected in Vanuatu, a response plan is in place. The Ministry of Health Emergency Medical Team are on standby with dedicated quarantine facilities in Port Vila and Luganville. We must take all the possible measures as soon as possible to prevent the outbreak of COVID-19 into the country. Managing critical risks and strengthening our resilience is key at this time.

The Government has recently taken some major actions as part of preventive and preparatory measures. As of 23 March 2020, all Vanuatu ports of entry are now closed until further notice (special considerations are provided for diplomats and medical personnel); only general cargo boats, oil, gas and fuel tankers will be allowed to enter the country but with special conditions requirements for crews and official not to come ashore; all private, naval and scientific research vessels are suspended from entering Vanuatu waters with the exception for vessels with missions related to COVID-19.

A key issue for the Government at this moment is to prevent and diagnose COVID-19 when a person is suspected of have contracted the virus. At the moment, the French Embassy is assisting Vanuatu to carry out the COVID-19 tests in New Caledonia. The Government is working to strengthen the health care capacity to test COVID-19 and including all the preparatory measures to manage a potential outbreak. The government has started
negotiations with international donors and partners for technical assistance and medical equipment, including COVID-19 testing capacity, and longer-term support.

COVID-19 is impacting negatively the economic activity around the world. The Government of Vanuatu is currently working with relevant agencies and the private sector to implement a mitigation plan to help to relieve the economic impact on businesses and families.

It is important to emphasize that there are no concerns of food supply in the country. After communication with major retailer companies, we can confirm that stock supplies and prices remain at their normal levels. Government will keep monitoring the level of prices of goods and services.

People are encouraged to follow the WHO’s five simple protection measures to keep safe:

1. Wash your hands frequently
2. Cover your mouth and nose with a flexed elbow or tissue when coughing and sneezing
3. Keep a distance of 1.5 to 2 meters between yourself and someone who is coughing and sneezing
4. Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth
5. If you have fever, cough and difficulty breathing, go to your nearest health facility.
   Avoid physical contact with others. If you can, call ahead to inform health staff you will be coming

Ni-Vanuatu society is strong and resilient. We have demonstrated before that we can work together to recovery after disasters. This is a new challenge for us, but if we follow the official recommendations of good hygiene and social distancing, and have faith in God we will get through this.

For queries and further information, please visit the official website http://www.covid19.gov.vu, or call the COVID-19 toll free information hotline on 119.