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A Statement from the President

Regarding the Nation's Efforts in Addressing COVID-19, an Unavoidable Public Health Emergency

March 17, 2020

Dear fellow Palauans and all residents:

As of today, there are still no confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19 here in Palau. Additionally, the vast majority of those who have contracted the disease are making full recoveries. However, as I wrote yesterday, several cases have now been identified in our neighbor to the east, Guam. As a result, we are taking additional measures to increase our vigilance. Our goal is to prevent the virus from entering Palau, but to be prepared in case it does.

It is important for the public to understand that the Government is taking this very seriously. Every relevant official is dedicated to this response. In the meantime, the most important thing for everyone to do is remain calm. Wash your hands regularly, avoid large gatherings, practice good hygiene, and avoid international travel to affected areas. Otherwise, we need to try our best to maintain. Go about your life and spend time with your family. I say once again: our greatest fear is fear itself.

Earlier today the Minister of Health certified COVID-19 as an “unavoidable emergency,” pursuant to 34 PNC § 332(a)(3). This certification does not mean that the virus has entered Palau, that the virus is out of control, or it is “unavoidable” to get the virus. Rather, the purpose of the certification is to put the government on alert and to enable the Ministry of Health to access the Hospital Trust Fund, opening up another source of funds to help with prevention and preparation. The Hospital Trust Fund exists for this purpose, and will ensure that we have what we need for our COVID-19 efforts. The certification also allows the Ministry of Health to bypass the normal government procurement process so that it can procure emergency equipment and supplies on an expedited basis. The Minister's action is being supported by the OEK and by a new Executive Order.

Through the supplemental budget bill that is currently pending, the OEK is appropriating an additional \$916,808 to the Hospital Trust Fund. It is also authorizing up to \$6 million in reserve funding to help us maintain government services in the face of declining tourism revenue. These two actions by OEK are critical because they ensure funding for both aspects of this COVID-19 pandemic: the health emergency and the economic emergency. The bill has been referred to the OEK for agreed technical changes and adjustments. The Leadership of both Chambers and I are in agreement on these measures, and I expect to receive the bill back promptly for my signature.

I am also issuing today a new Executive Order that requires all government officials to provide their full cooperation to the Ministry of Health and the National Emergency Committee. This new order permits the Ministry and Committee to request the cooperation of any government employee, and requires that employee to assist as needed.

The Ministry of Health and National Emergency Committee are developing phased plans for all government agencies. There will be specific measures for prevention of the virus, which is the stage we are in now. Measures will include screening, monitoring, and appropriate restrictions.

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There will also be a specific plan in case the virus does enter Palau. These response and treatment plans will focus on protecting our most at-risk populations, including first responders, the elderly, and people with pre-existing health conditions. The Ministry of Public Infrastructure, Industry, and Commerce, together with the Ministry of Education, have been charged with taking necessary steps to clean and prepare public buildings, including schools, to minimize the risk of virus transition in public places. And the flight restrictions related to China, Hong Kong, and Macau that have been in place since February are being maintained until the end of April. Cruise ship restrictions are being expanded to include all affected areas. Realistically, it is unlikely that any cruise ship will meet the new requirements to enter Palau. Although this is unfortunate, based on what we have seen with cruise ship cases globally, this restriction is necessary.

The Cabinet, the Office of the President, and the National Development Bank of Palau are all working closely with the private sector, including Palau Visitors Association, Belau Tourism Association, and the Chamber of Commerce, to identify appropriate economic measures to help our citizens and businesses. Our goal is to keep all of our people and visitors safe and healthy while also keeping Palau open for business. We must do everything we can to support our tourism industry and encourage tourists to continue to visit, while at the same time ensuring adequate safeguards to screen out and protect ourselves from the small fraction of high-risk travelers. With help from our international partners, we do not have to choose between tourism and good health. We can have both.

We are not trying to make meaningless pronouncements, but to take meaningful actions. That is why, at this time, we are not issuing a "state of emergency" declaration. Such a declaration would not change our COVID-19 prevention efforts. Through cooperation with the OEK, we are already accessing critical funding sources on an expedited timeline, including reserve funding to offset the economic impacts of this pandemic. By issuing a "certification of an unavoidable emergency," the Ministry of Health has opened up an immediately-available funding source and satisfied the criteria permitting the rapid, emergency procurement of necessary supplies. All government agencies have been instructed to prioritize their COVID-19 efforts. If any of our efforts hit a road block, including access to critical funding, a declaration of emergency will be an option. But, for now, what we are doing is working: we have our plan, all government officials have their orders, and the key is to follow-through and implement.

We are also not, at this time, closing our airport or sea ports. Doing so would cause major chaos and create two problems instead of one. We need universal screenings and smart travel restrictions to keep sick people out without rejecting the healthy travelers who drive our local economy. Closing our schools would also create significant additional problems for the parents who rely on schools to provide supervision and care for their children. There are no COVID-19 cases in Palau, so there is no reason for our children to feel unsafe at school.

Shutting down the country is not the solution to this situation. It will take many months for our economy to rebound from these international travel restrictions and virus-related restrictions, but by being smart now we can hopefully mitigate some of the damage. Together, and with the help of our friends around the world, we can and will overcome this situation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tommy E. Remengesau, Jr." The signature is fluid and cursive.

Tommy E. Remengesau, Jr.
President of the Republic of Palau