



National Address
By Dr. the Rt. Hon. Keith Mitchell
Prime Minister
July 29, 2021

Fellow Grenadians, I greet you this evening with a deep sense of concern. We have been at war with COVID-19 for 16 months. There is evidence of fatigue on all fronts, which I understand, but the battle is far from over. We must continue to do everything possible to protect ourselves and our loved ones. I am thankful to God every day that we have so far managed the crisis reasonably well. To date, we have recorded 169 COVID-19 cases, one of the lowest in the world. However, we cannot be oblivious to the statistics outside of our borders. In neighbouring Trinidad and Tobago, more than 37,600 cases have been recorded; in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, 2,280; St. Lucia, more than 5,500 and over in Barbados, more than 4,300.

My friends, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unleash havoc around the world, with the emerging strains, like Delta, proving to be far more contagious. Thousands are still dying daily, thousands more are hospitalised, many fighting for their lives, some even wishing they'd done something differently or sooner. I have seen some heart-wrenching moments where persons who were refusing to be vaccinated, while on their death bed, were pleading with family and friends, not to subject themselves to the same fate.

Thankfully, sisters and brothers, the availability of various COVID-19 vaccines has helped to save countless lives around the world. The scientists readily admit that the vaccines will not prevent you from contracting or spreading the disease, but if you do contract the virus, the vaccines will reduce the likelihood of you having severe symptoms, requiring hospitalisation and even dying.

The science is not perfect, but if you were to consider probabilities, your chances of surviving COVID-19 as a vaccinated person, are much higher than if you're not, particularly if you have underlying medical conditions. In the United States for example, 99.5% of those dying now from COVID-19, are unvaccinated. These statistics show that we have a chance to control or change what is happening.

My friends, let us choose wisely, let us protect ourselves, protect our families, protect our co-workers, protect those we serve, protect those with whom we interact, protect our country. Get vaccinated today. It is in fact, your best shot. I have done it. My 98-year-old

mother has received her two doses and thousands of other Grenadians have been fully vaccinated.

I have repeatedly encouraged all who are eligible to get vaccinated to do so, if not for yourself, for those around you who are more vulnerable. My friends, I must admit that I am concerned about the level of uptake here in Grenada. It is quite difficult to understand the level of vaccine hesitancy we are seeing.

To date, only 21,371 people have received their first dose of AstraZeneca and of that number, only 16,075 people are fully vaccinated. I cannot underscore enough the importance of achieving a much higher level of vaccination that will allow us to develop the level of herd immunity that will further reduce the potential risk we all face. I would not want to think that we are waiting for mass hospitalisation and even multiple deaths before we act.

Over the past year and a half, countries have been forced to take bold, sometimes unpopular decisions, which, though absolutely necessary to protect the lives of people, have also caused increased anxiety. The far-reaching impact of the pandemic continues to necessitate these tough decisions and Government must balance the dual objective of safeguarding the lives of people, while at the same time, protecting livelihoods. It is not practical to remain indefinitely insulated from the wider world economy and we must jumpstart the process of economic recovery. However, in doing so, the health of the population remains a foremost concern.

I've heard the view expressed that based on the low infection rate Grenada has experienced, we should close the borders and allow the people within to operate as normal. In a utopian world, that might be a plausible approach, but we do not live in a perfect world, COVID-19 has created a new normal, and we have to learn to adapt and live with it. Therefore, closing borders indefinitely is not practical, as tourism is a key economic driver.

This becomes even more important as we prepare to begin welcoming St. George's University students back to the country, for the start of the semester in mid-August. Having the students on island and the level of ancillary activity created by their presence, not only creates direct and indirect employment for hundreds of our people, there is also a significant impact on the local economy.

Sisters and brothers, I assure you that Government's commitment to restarting the economy does not mean that we place any lesser value on the lives of the people; it simply means we are constantly striving to maintain the delicate balance of safeguarding lives and protecting livelihoods. And we do have the benefit of a COVID-19 vaccine to provide a measure of protection for our people. Soon, we expect to have an additional vaccine so that Grenadians can have a choice. The Ministry of Health will provide more details on this in the coming days, but I can confirm now that the expected shipment will allow younger Grenadians an opportunity to be vaccinated.

My friends, I have observed a very disturbing trend in recent weeks, one that can only be described as a growing culture of defiance and increasing tendency towards lawlessness. I readily acknowledge that human beings are social creatures and restrictions, especially over an extended period, are difficult to endure.

I know our young people in particular, just want the freedom to be. I was a boy once, a long time ago, yes, but I understand that desire to be out and about and to be carefree. But times are not normal, we are in a global pandemic that has claimed the lives of more than four million people around the world. Our desire to live a normal life is natural, but we must remain conscious of the need to protect ourselves first and foremost, or the reality is, we may not even be around to live the normal lives we desire. This Government is doing its best to protect you and keep you safe in a period of great uncertainty.

Sisters and brothers, this is no easy period. As an elected representative for almost 37 years, I can say without a measure of doubt that this has been one of the most challenging periods of my entire political life. But this isn't about me, I am well aware that it is not easy for you the people, it is not easy for the health professionals who operate on the frontline; it is not easy for those charged with enforcing the law; it is not easy for the policy-makers who must establish the necessary guidelines; it is not easy for any one of us. But as we face this formidable giant of an enemy, what we do have, is the power of togetherness, the power of collective action, the power of working together towards a common goal. It has gotten us this far and we must continue to leverage it as we go forward.

Our rigorous protocols and enforcement measures at the ports of entry, serve as a powerful gatekeeper for detecting and isolating the virus. Except for one incident which led to limited community spread, we have managed to identify all cases at the border, which in turn, allows us to continue much of our normal daily activities. But sisters and brothers, we must be mindful, that the situation can change in the blink of an eye.

It has happened elsewhere in the region and can quite easily happen right here in Pure Grenada. Is that what we want – to see infection rates rising rapidly and uncontrollably; to be separated from loved ones because being close puts them at risk of getting sick; to be placed on a ventilator because we can no longer breathe on our own; to see our medical facilities completely overwhelmed because there is insufficient equipment and personnel to treat those in need? That cannot be our vision for the future. If this situation materialises here, the health care team will be forced to choose who lives and who dies. It is not right or fair to place anyone in such a serious predicament.

We are at a critical juncture, and we must seek to safeguard our coveted status. Going forward, there will be some changes to how we operate to ensure greater cohesiveness and collaboration between the COVID-19 Committee and the Royal Grenada Police Force, particularly as it relates to the permission granted to event organisers and promoters.

The COVID-19 committee was set up as an advisory body to Government, and also has joint responsibility for granting permission for what should be, carefully considered

exceptions to the regulations. The system has worked well for a long time, but there now seems to be a breakdown of authority. Government must therefore reassert its position that protecting the lives of people is its primary responsibility, while at the same time, facilitating some balance with social and economic activities.

Just this afternoon, I met with senior officers of the RGPF to discuss how we can effectively bolster enforcement procedures and ensure greater compliance with the COVID-19 regulations. I have made it emphatically clear that there should be no semblance of preferential treatment or status afforded to anyone. From the south of the island to the northern tip of the country, and including the sister islands, the rules are to be applied equally across the board.

Applications for activities that fall outside the scope of the regulations, must be fairly considered and if approved, these events must be properly monitored by health wardens and the police. From henceforth, full vaccination of all patrons and workers will be a requirement for any activity that falls outside of the numbers permitted within the COVID-19 regulations and for which special permission has to be sought.

Enforcement is a necessary part of the process, but there is need for greater responsibility, on the part of promoters and event organisers to ensure that they adhere to stipulated requirements and on the part of patrons, greater demonstration of personal responsibility for your own safety. Help us to help you. Sisters and brothers, the frightening reality is that any breaches, however minor, puts us all at risk.

Sisters and brothers, this Government has always championed the working class. We have never wavered in our commitment to holistic, inclusive and sustainable development. Faced with the significant economic fallout from the pandemic, we are challenged to facilitate a more enabling environment that will allow displaced persons to earn a living, while at the same time, creating opportunities for those who traditionally rely on Government for daily work. I am painfully aware that hundreds of our nationals are still without a source of income.

That is why Government is now in the advanced stages of preparation for the implementation of another COVID-19 economic stimulus package, which is intended to benefit close to 9,000 Grenadians directly, with another 10,000 to benefit indirectly. This \$36-million package will be funded through the Caribbean Development Bank under the Inter-American Development Bank/Caribbean Development Bank Global Loan Programme and the Government of Grenada. The support programme is expected to roll out in September 2021.

The stimulus package will target vulnerable persons, who are most impacted by the pandemic, and will include, but not limited to, persons in the cultural sector whose livelihood depends almost exclusively on cultural activities, farmers, agro-processors, caterers, operators of entertainment centres, former cruise ship workers, taxi drivers, water taxi operators, tourist vendors, bus operators, former hotel employees, and LIAT workers.

Beneficiaries will receive support ranging from one-off payments to monthly transfers for up to six months, based on the category of eligibility. Government was very diligent in designing this programme and engaged in broad-based consultation with stakeholders in the public and private sectors, as well as the CDB, to ensure the widest possible reach for the stimulus support package. Further details of the package and the categories of beneficiaries will be shared by the Ministry of Finance, in the coming weeks.

This new programme of support is in addition to other measures already taken by Government to stimulate job creation and economic activity. Cabinet recently approved several initiatives to support the expansion of existing micro, small and medium enterprises and the creation of new ones. More than \$12 million is currently available for lending on extremely concessional terms and conditions.

Additionally, Government will make available \$2 million for small hoteliers and \$5 million for small businesses in other sectors, through the COVID-19 Support Fund Facility at the Grenada Development Bank. Eligible businesses will qualify for loans between \$40,000 and \$300,000. The facility provides what can be considered a lifeline for the next three years to the eligible businesses, enabling them to stay afloat and or expand, or to encourage startups.

Government will also inject an additional \$5 million into the Small Business Development Fund to support the development of micro enterprises. These businesses can qualify for loans of up to \$40,000. Both lines of credit at the Grenada Development Bank, offer an attractive interest rate of 1%, with a grace period of up to three years. The loans for micro enterprises are repayable over 10 years, while the repayment period for the larger loans is 12 years. As an additional incentive, loan recipients in both categories can benefit from an additional \$5,000 in grant support to further bolster business operations.

Sisters and brothers, this is your Government at work, creating opportunities and empowering our people. Clearly, we are committed to creating an enabling environment that fuels citizen-centric growth. I am confident that the funding facilities at GDB, will help to boost economic activity and create hundreds of new jobs.

My friends, in addition to incentivising small business development. Government also continues to work on stimulating direct job creation. Since the start of the pandemic, some workers who were routinely employed by Government, have not had the opportunity to earn a single day's pay. It is not easy to see your people hurting, especially the poorest among us, and feel powerless to help. Therefore, as a Government for and of the people, we continue to work to ensure that we help as many people as possible.

Government has just embarked on a massive de-bushing programme, to which just over \$14 million has been allocated. Over the next 10 fortnights, more than 3,000 Grenadians will be dispatched to assigned areas across the country to trim overhanging branches and clear roadsides and drains. The workers will be divided into seven-member crews which will be monitored by a group of 128 supervisors, each of whom will be assigned three crews.

I assure you sisters and brothers, this is no political ploy. There will be fairness in the distribution of work among people. I have made it clear to party supporters that this is not a party programme, this is implemented by the Government of Grenada, for the benefit of all eligible persons, regardless of their political or other affiliation.

I have gone a step further and authorised the creation of a hotline where reports can be made, in the event that the true intention of the programme is not being followed. If you are aware of instances where fairness is compromised, I encourage you to call 417-6643 to make your report. The issue will be examined and if proven to be legitimate, the necessary remedial action will be taken.

Sisters and brothers, this is not a time for party politics, this is a time for all of us, as Grenadians, as custodians of this beautiful country of ours, to work together for the benefit of all. No one citizen has a greater right than any other, what we do have is a collective responsibility to make the right decisions now that will create a legacy for future generations of this country.

In this long and enduring partnership, Government continues to fulfill its obligations to the hard-working people of this country, including public officers. We have committed to begin paying the 4% salary increase to public officers. The increase will be reflected in the monthly salaries from the end of August 2021.

You would recall that the increase became due in January of this year, but due to the economic fallout from the pandemic, Government requested a delay. It means therefore that there's a seven-month period for which public officers are owed increases and Government will issue one-year bond payments for the amount owed.

We acknowledge the agreement of police officers and the security forces thus far and I assure you that the payments will be processed with the August payroll. Public officers, many of you have been patient and I commend you for that and your continued service to the people of Grenada, Carriacou and Petite Martinique.

Many are also concerned about the pension disqualification issue. As you are all aware, this matter is currently before the court and Government will accept and respect whatever judgment is delivered. It is important to remember that this Government is not responsible for pension disqualification.

The issue has existed for many years, and successive governments, including those led by the NNP, failed to address it. Acting on a deep sense of moral responsibility, this administration agreed to tackle the issue of pension reform, a bold move and one that is cost-prohibitive, but also one that we feel is in the best interest of our long-serving and dedicated public officers.

There are many issues that threaten to divide us and distract us from forging ahead with the development agenda, but in closing sisters and brothers, I am compelled to encourage us all to continue to work hand in hand for the advancement of our land.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is the predominant challenge that confronts us daily and we have been successful so far in this war on this disease. Let us keep fighting that common enemy, instead of fighting against each other. We didn't come this far in this battle by undermining the one advantage we have, that of presenting a united effort.

God forbid, if there is an outbreak of COVID-19 in Grenada, the virus will not single out specific persons, every one of us will be a potential victim. Therefore, adopting a united front will improve our chances of continuing to be successful in this war. We are weary, but the battle is far from over and therefore we must carry on, together. The COVID-19 protocols have been established for our benefit, compliance is key, let us all cooperate.

Sisters and brothers, I thank you. I thank you for your understanding and patience throughout this entire ordeal that has engulfed the world. I thank you for working with your elected representatives to keep this country safe. I thank you for the many sacrifices you have made and continue to make every day. I thank you for being responsible citizens and I encourage those who have not been, to follow the example of others. I thank you for your patriotism, your love for this beautiful country of ours. I thank you for loving and respecting your fellowmen and women. And I thank you in anticipation of your continued cooperation in protecting the lives of everyone. I thank you.