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PMO, Bhutan 

I would like to update everyone that the construction of cubicles at the Multi-level Car Parks in Thimphu that will host the vegetable sellers is halfway complete.

I am told the thromde will allocate the completed ones starting today, and priority will be given to interested vendors from the Centenary Farmers' Market (CFM).

As elaborated earlier on various media platforms, this is a temporary measure adopted to unbind one of the most threatening congregation in the capital at a time when we are working hard to protect everyone from COVID-19. Social distancing is critical, but we all know that place has seen the biggest crowd, especially during weekends, despite all awareness and monitoring.

Although no individual in sound judgement would have even considered, this move is not to "punish or penalise" anyone, as sounded off by a few concerned. Why would a government guided by good sense even do that? Some talk of politics but if that was really the case, why would a politically elected government make such unpopular decision? That is not important because we are living in a challenging time and we all must work together to sail through.

As for the CFM vendors, we realise the inconvenience caused, just like we are as disconcerted with the closure of movie theatres or night clubs that have compromised income of so many people, especially youth engaged in those businesses.

While the option of the car park is temporary, what is permanent is the construction of five similar structures under thromde and the vegetable outlets in over 40 zones. These open up slots for more than 300 vendors.

Realising the need to protect the business interest of the CFM vendors, the PMO requested thromde to give preference to them first. We said their moving out of CFM could be temporary, until social distancing was not an issue over time, or for good if their businesses do well at the new locations.

The other option was to introduce 300 additional vendors who could be competing to cater to the same number of Thimphu residents. I personally thought that will kill the market for the CFM vendors.

We meant well for them because at CFM, the gathering in terms of number of sellers and buyers, will have to be severely restricted for next few years. In the event of a positive COVID-19 case from there, we will have to resort to closing down or lock down of the area that will gravely impact the businesses.

For information, the vegetable outlets in the zones will be complete within the two months deadline. The CFM vendors, including the ones moving to Multi-Level Car Parks, will once again be given the priority to operate those shops in the zones.

Meanwhile, the existing CFM will always remain a farmer's market. However, for now we will ensure only one third of the existing cubicles remain open to serve the people of that area. It will open from Wednesday.

As for the residents, we understand the sentiments attached to the market that has long served us in re-stocking our kitchens. I have my own childhood memories of sitting next to my aunt under one of the sheds, as I assisted her with the farm produce.

But times have changed.

It entails driving all the way. Consumption of time and fuel aside, it requires maneuvering through traffic congestion and finding way through the frenzy.

So as we strive to make products sold at CFM available at your own locality, we are convinced that it has a lot of positive impact on not just for the Thimphu residents but country's economy.

My office is closely working with the Thromde and agriculture ministry to streamline vegetable management unit, so that all the outlets have uninterrupted supply from all 20 dzongkhags. Building on the existing system, the agencies will source, aggregate and transport fresh produce round the years for Thimphu residents.

Meanwhile, my concern remains with the present CFM vendors, who, despite all good intentions are being fed with information that may not help them make right decisions.

If they do not want to move out from the existing infrastructure under any circumstances, if they are agreeable to the conditions imposed, if they do not mind the entry of over 300 new vendors, we will have it so.

But I am also certain these same lot of vendors will come to my office six months down the line, saying their businesses are affected, their livelihood harmed. What do we do then?

Dr Lotay Tsherin
Prime Minister