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## **Prime Minister Rt. Hon. Dean Barrow Announces Closure of Borders to Nationals**

My Fellow Belizeans,

Earlier today, the Ministry of Health's leadership team publicly announced the worrying news of test results having this morning confirmed Belize's fourth case of COVID-19.

The infected person is from the Cayo District, but up until about 11 days ago, had been traveling to and from Belize City where he worked. He is in isolation at the Western Regional Hospital and the DHS and his team have already commenced their mapping and tracing exercise. Indeed, swabbing of contacts as a prelude to testing has already started; and the exercise includes coverage of the medical professionals involved in the treatment of the patient.

In view of all this, my message today is for a two-fold purpose.

It is clear now that the State of Emergency declaration and the shuttering of the country came not a moment too soon. Still, there are people insisting that we are overreacting in promoting some of the draconian measures contained in the revised statutory instrument signed last night by His Excellency the Governor General. I hope that this fourth case will help to persuade them of the absolute gravity of the situation.

Accordingly, I also appeal to everyone not to try to beat the system. Stop trying -- and here I pitch my petition to business owners and individuals -- stop trying to find workarounds or opt-outs of the restrictions that force you to close and that limit your activities. I repeat that your movements must only be purpose-driven, confined to the reasons clearly listed in the Emergency Regulations.

Travel across district lines is curtailed, and Easter is cancelled except, of course, as an opportunity for prayer, reflection, and virtual attendance at the religious services that our churches will live stream. You all know that our first two cases, one of which led to the infection of a third person, were imported. This fourth one seemingly was not. It, therefore, makes crystal clear the urgency of the heightened vigilance and protective measures that the State of Emergency is

designed to achieve. And there is yet more to be done. In the result, I will now, after a word of explanation, announce an additional ramp-up to our Emergency Regulations.

Some days ago, we notified of our decision to place all Belizeans entering or re-entering Belize, under a mandatory 14-day quarantine. Since that time around 19 Belizeans are now confined in Corozal Town at two facilities. Yet, they keep on coming. This is a stark reminder that our first two cases were brought in from L.A. and New York. The situation of Belizeans that have been in the U.S. and Mexico simply returning to the country willy nilly, cannot be allowed to continue. It leaves the door wide open to importation of the virus and this can upend all our war efforts against COVID-19.

As a consequence, and after obtaining the unanimous support of the National Oversight Committee, the Government of Belize has decided that our borders are now to be closed even to Belizeans seeking to enter the country. Except in the case of those that are returning from travel for urgent medical attention or some other emergency purpose, no Belizean currently abroad can return to Belize. This prohibition will, in the first instance, last for the duration of the State of Emergency; and it will begin at 12:01 a.m. on Sunday, April 5th.

It is, I readily admit, an extreme move. There is, however, no doubt that it has become necessary as we do everything to head off the swamping of our health system and the serious loss of life that the proliferation of the virus would entail. I, therefore, ask all Belizeans, and particularly those in the diaspora, for their understanding. This is the fight of our lives and I deliberately use the metaphor when I say that Belize must absolutely be placed on a war footing.

Our new decision is, as we have checked and double-checked, entirely legal and grounded in the powers contained in the Constitution of the country and under the Governor General's Emergency Proclamation. We shall therefore proceed and for the next 30 days our position is irreversible. That, however, is not all.

The circumstances of the Cayo case make clear that the danger of extensive human-to-human transmission is now upon us. I, therefore, reserve the right to come back to you next week to announce even more stringent shutdown directives.

Some businesses that escaped first round closure might find themselves included in a second round. Naturally, this would only happen after the National Oversight Committee meeting on Monday and consultation with Cabinet.

I close by sharing some good news on the economic front. The application forms for those that have lost their jobs and are to be provided GOB relief are now available. In fact, there has already been

a first rush of applications. The verification process is underway, and people should be seeing their money in the banks within two or so business days.

Finally, OFID has confirmed its agreement to the reprogramming of 10 million Belize dollars from the infrastructure component of the Southside Poverty Alleviation Project. That money will now be used to augment our cash to the people program. Additionally, OFID is fast tracking approval for a new Belize loan in the amount of 20 million dollars. When all of this is placed in the pool of funds to come from the World Bank and the IDB, we are well on our way in the effort to leave no one behind in the exercise to cover comprehensively our unemployed and those struggling to feed themselves and their families.

As always, then, together we do our best and together we shall prevail.

Venceremos,

And God bless Belize.