



## **National Address**

**The Most Hon. Dr. Hubert Minnis**

**Prime Minister and Minister of Finance**

**Sunday, 21 February 2021**

**Nassau, Bahamas**

Good afternoon.

In The Bahamas, we are nearly one year into the COVID-19 pandemic.

You may recall that our first positive case was recorded in mid-March of last year.

COVID-19 has killed nearly 2.5 million people around the world.

Here at home, 179 people have died because of the virus, with 8,462 confirmed cases, as of the 20<sup>th</sup> of February.

We continue to mourn those in The Bahamas who have died, and we continue to pray for their loved ones.

We also pray for the recovery and healing of all of those infected by the virus.

May we continue to show acts of kindness and love and generosity to those who may be in hospital and quarantine at this time.

Fellow Bahamians:

The COVID-19 pandemic has left many people suffering with long-term and serious illness.

The pandemic has slowed the world's economy.

International travel remains restricted, and the pandemic has done great damage to the tourism industry in every country in the world.

In recent weeks in the Northern Hemisphere, we are moving on from the darkest period of the early winter, during which there were record cases, record hospitalizations and record deaths.

On February 16, the World Health Organization, or W.H.O., noted that global cases continued to fall, with 2.7 million new cases the previous week.

This was a 16 percent decline compared to the week before. Deaths declined by 10 percent over the same period.

Still, there remain areas of concern in our region.

Several countries in the Caribbean are experiencing surges.

Some of our Caribbean neighbors have had to introduce greater restrictions and emergency measures approved by their parliaments, similar to the ones we instituted during various periods of the pandemic.

These measures include expanded overnight curfews and weekend curfews that may last for some time.

We wish our Caribbean brothers and sisters well during these difficult times.

It is important for every Bahamian to remember that this deadly virus spreads quickly, and that new variants could make the situation worse within a relatively short period of time.

It is possible that we could experience another serious surge.

Of particular concern are variants of the virus that have emerged out of the United Kingdom, Brazil and South Africa.

However, there are also other variants scientists are monitoring.

There are fears that some new variants are more infectious.

There are fears that they could cause increased sickness and death.

There are also fears that existing vaccines may not be as effective against them as opposed to earlier versions of the virus.

Here in The Bahamas, we have had a long, relatively successful period.

The Bahamian people are largely complying with the rules and the Government's policies are mostly working.

As a people, most of us have collectively taken this health emergency seriously.

Most unfortunately and recklessly, there have been those with political motives who criticized the life-saving measures the Government put in place to save and to protect lives.

They do not want rules.

Their policy suggestions would lead to more deaths and illness.

As a doctor, I know it is important to act early and aggressively to save lives and to prevent suffering.

As your prime minister, my guiding star will continue to be your welfare and that of your loved ones.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

The continued emergency measures and rules have helped buy us time in the race to get our people vaccinated.

Vaccines are critical to ending the pandemic.

In The Bahamas, there will not be a government mandate requiring you to take a vaccine.

However, we strongly urge all who are eligible to get vaccinated.

I will take the vaccine.

I will urge family and friends to take the vaccine.

By getting vaccinated you will help the country to return to a greater level of normalcy.

By getting vaccinated you will also help our economy to recover faster.

When a large percentage of Bahamians are vaccinated, we will be able to responsibly open up even more.

More economic activity will be possible, leading to more jobs, more working hours, more family income, more small business activity and a return of more tourists in the months ahead.

It is also quite possible that being vaccinated will be a requirement by other countries for you to travel overseas.

Other countries may not allow you to enter their borders unless you have proof of vaccination.

We are hearing that cruise lines may require their passengers to show that they have been vaccinated.

Proof of vaccination may be one of the critical measures in helping the tourism industry to bounce back around the world.

As a leading tourism destination, we must play our part and set an example for the world.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

The distribution and administration of the COVID-19 vaccine will be a huge operational and logistical challenge.

It will be one of the most complex challenges ever faced by the public health sector.

As Dr. Merceline Dahl-Regis pointed out recently, The Bahamas has demonstrated a strategy to eliminate congenital rubella using a mass immunization campaign in 1998.

We are fortunate to have her expertise and experience.

Individuals who worked on that team in 1998, are assisting with the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine in 2021.

I wish to update you on our vaccination plans and strategy.

The National COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Plan is in the final stages of completion in preparation for the arrival of the first batch of AstraZeneca vaccines.

The AstraZeneca vaccine will be administered in two doses.

These COVID-19 vaccines will be available free of charge.

Between eight and 10 approved vaccination sites have been identified on New Providence.

This includes drive-thru sites.

Vaccination sites have also been identified on Grand Bahama and the Family Islands.

Health officials and the National COVID-19 Vaccine Consultative Committee are looking at additional platforms to distribute the vaccine in order to increase access to and ensure equity of distribution to all communities.

There will be a focus on high-risk populations where COVID-19 has occurred.

Mobile units will be used to safely distribute vaccines to vulnerable populations in their communities.

Vaccine appointment software is very near completion and is expected to be rolled out in advance of distribution.

This will allow those who choose to take the vaccine to schedule their appointments digitally on their smartphone, tablet or computer.

For those without access to the internet or a device, appointment centers will be set up to provide assistance with making appointments to receive the vaccine.

Among the first priority groups eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine on New Providence and Grand Bahama are:

- Healthcare workers;
- People over the age of 65
- uniformed branch members;
- frontline workers;
- critical workers in high-risk settings and
- other essential service workers.

On the Family Islands, local medical teams will be assisted by mobile teams from New Providence.

On the Family Islands, health teams will vaccinate all eligible residents who choose to take the vaccine at the same time.

This means that everyone on the Family Islands will be vaccinated at the same time.

The schedule will not follow the prioritized group rollout.

It is important that all eligible residents who choose to take the vaccine make their appointments once the dates are announced.

The United States Embassy has offered to assist with air transportation to the Family Islands during the vaccine rollout, especially to our smaller islands and cays.

The Consultative Committee and health officials will continue to provide regular updates as plans are finalized.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Tomorrow, Monday, February 22<sup>nd</sup>, we expect to receive more details related to the shipment of the 100,000 doses of the

AstraZeneca vaccine that have been secured through the COVAX Facility.

Additionally, the Bahamas Government has also been able to secure a commitment from the Government of India for a small quantity of AstraZeneca vaccines from a WHO/Emergency Use Listing (EUL)-approved manufacturer in India.

The Government continues to work on all fronts to secure additional approved vaccines for The Bahamas.

Officials are speaking directly with multiple suppliers to obtain more WHO/EUL approved vaccines.

As we have said previously, the Government will only accept COVID-19 vaccines that are pre-qualified for use by the World Health Organization and approved by stringent regulatory authorities.

The vaccines must have high safety and efficacy records.

Where vaccines have been used there have been decreased hospitalizations and deaths.

Vaccines save millions of lives each year.

They work by preparing the body's immune system to recognize and fight off a virus.

Worldwide, more than 190 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines have already been administered.

Getting vaccinated is one of the ways we can protect ourselves and our loved ones from COVID-19 and the new variant strains that have developed.

Fellow Bahamians and Residents:

Now is not the time to let our guards down.

The pandemic is still with us.

Even as we race to begin vaccinations, we must continue to abide by the health care measures that helped us in the pandemic over the past year.

Health officials continue to closely monitor the viral patterns present in The Bahamas, particularly among travel-related/imported cases of COVID-19.

Let us try to avoid another surge.

Another surge would be detrimental to public health and our economy.

Please continue to wear your masks.

Please avoid large gatherings.

Keep at least a six-foot distance from others.

Wash your hands thoroughly and frequently.

Stay at home if you are not feeling well and do not go where large crowds are gathered.

To bring this pandemic to an end, a vast majority of the population worldwide needs to be immunized to the virus.

Let us play our part and let us be an example to the world.

Let me note that the National Vaccine Consultative Committee offered detailed medical and health information during their press conference on February 4<sup>th</sup>.

To learn more visit [opm.gov.bs/vaccines](http://opm.gov.bs/vaccines) and [healthytogether.gov.bs](http://healthytogether.gov.bs) and follow our Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter platforms.

All statements and updates from the committee can be found at [opm.gov.bs](http://opm.gov.bs).

**Fellow Bahamians and Residents:**

As we embark on our vaccination campaign it is important that you reject the large amount of fake news and misinformation circulating on social media and the Internet.

Let me state again that we are using World Health Organization-approved vaccines.

These vaccines are safe and they are already being administered in various countries around the world.

Please get your information about vaccines from reliable local and international scientific and media sources.

Do not read or listen to random, unsourced material from people you do not know.

Do not listen to random videos random people created.

Do not read and believe random posts from people with no medical or scientific credentials.

Malicious actors are deliberately creating and circulating lies and foolishness designed to scare you from taking vaccines.

These lies and misinformation are dangerous.

They create unnecessary doubt and fear, causing some to reject vaccines and others to delay taking them.

As a doctor let me say that not taking or delaying taking a safe vaccine could cost you your life or cause you to get very sick.

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

COVID-19 remains a killer.

The approved vaccines are effective in helping prevent severe illness and death.

Do not put your life at risk because you believed fake news on social media.

Throughout the pandemic Bahamians have largely been disciplined and followed the public health guidelines.

Let us use this same discipline when it comes to the vaccination process.

Encourage your family and friends to get vaccinated when it is their time.

If you have a question check a reputable news or information source or ask your healthcare provider.

The Government has started a robust public health campaign to give you the facts.

Vaccines are critical to all of us being able to resume more normal lives.

The pandemic has taken a toll on people's mental health, causing so many to be more distant from the people they love than they'd normally be.

We have not been able to interact with our families, friends and colleagues in the manner we were used to for all these months.

Vaccines will help lead us to better times. They will help end the pandemic if a large number of us take them.

If we believe the fake news and the lies being told about vaccines, this pandemic will last much longer than it needs to.

**Fellow Bahamians and Residents:**

There remains great anxiety throughout the country regarding the state of the economy and the state of our fiscal affairs.

This is understandable as we have had to deal with the twin economic catastrophes of Hurricane Dorian and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Let us not forget Hurricane Irma, when for the first time in our nation's history, we successfully air-lifted our brothers and sisters from our southern islands and no lives were lost.

Never in our recent history have we had to deal with disruptions of this scale.

Thousands of people remain out of work. Hundreds of businesses are struggling to keep their doors open.

Recently, there has been reckless chatter by some, suggesting that the country was on an economic precipice and that the country's finances were in a depleted and chaotic state.

Let me assure all Bahamians that while we face significant challenges that will remain with us for some time, the Government is meeting its core commitments and obligations.

At the same time, we are providing millions of dollars every month to support the special unemployment assistance programs, the food program, and business loans and grants, to Bahamian small businesses on a scale never before seen in The Bahamas.

My government developed and announced its Resilient Bahamas plan during the most recent budget exercise.

We have been faithfully executing this plan.

And, we have provided even additional funding to extend the food programme and the unemployment programs which continue to benefit tens of thousands of Bahamian families.

I will be presenting the mid-year budget presentation to Parliament this Wednesday in which I will report to the nation on our economic and fiscal situation.

I will update you on our progress toward implementing the recommendations of the Economic Recovery Committee in an effort to ensure we have as strong and as robust an economic recovery as possible.

We are emerging out of this pandemic. Our economy will begin to improve this year.

We will emerge into a better future.

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

Let me close by thanking you for your fortitude and your forbearance this year.

A Caribbean colleague recently told me that throughout the region, people are talking about how well The Bahamas has done during the pandemic compared to other countries.

It is you, the Bahamian people, through your actions, who have caused many around the world to mark the manner of our bearing.

It is the greatest privilege of my life to serve as your prime minister.

Let us continue to hold each other up in prayer and in love.

Let us also remember that the pandemic is not over.

We still have difficult days ahead as we try to prevent another serious surge.

There are difficult days ahead as we rebuild our economy.

And there remain difficult days ahead to heal the sick, to comfort the grieving and the ill, and to restore our national well-being.

But I know, without any doubt, that better days are ahead because of the success we have already achieved during one of our most difficult years as a people.

During this Lenten season, let us pray to the God of New Beginnings for recovery and healing as we look forward in the hope of Easter to resurrection and to new life in Christ.

May God bless you and your families.

May God bless the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, one people, united in spirit and united in hope.

Have a blessed Sunday. Thank you and good afternoon.

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