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ROYAL GOVERNMENT OF BHUTAN
PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE



June 19, 2020

Press release

Moving forward: In transition to a new-normal

Guided by His Majesty's compassion and wisdom, the country is united to weather a global pandemic. Under the firm and prudent leadership, the country saw some radical measures and introduced policies that came as uncompromising.

Among others, to safeguard people from the disease, several restrictions in various areas were introduced since March, as we adopted the highest levels of prevention from COVID-19.

It was the unprecedented cooperation of every agency and the responsibility every Bhutanese assumed during such critical times that made these initiatives work.

Three months on, we realise the measures we adopted in anticipation of the worse withstood the test. The journey so far has been one of learning, from which sprouts this confidence to move forward.

Seeking blessings from the King, drawing confidence from the people across the nation and the resolve of those in the frontline, the government is charting the way ahead.

In doing so, the government continues to emphasise health and safety of our people above everything else. We will not condone any acts that would compromise our efforts against the disease and risk local transmission.

Amid increasing number of cases in our quarantine facilities and reports of local transmissions across the border towns, expressions of concerns are only natural. Some would be content with measures as they exist, while others would favour government to tighten existing restrictions.

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But the way forward, if we really trust our system and frontline workers, is for us to draw advantages from the circumstances we are in. Given a choice, we will always go for life over livelihood.

However, with lives secured, it only makes sense to continue our livelihoods. When we know we have the room to allow economic activities, continuing to focus on prevention alone, comes on the side of an irrationality.

Countries around the world at this stage, faced with rampant local transmission are trying to strike a balance between the pandemic and the socio-economic sustenance.

In our case, it's unique. It is about taking advantage of our effective system that has known no local transmission, complemented by our uncompromising bid to protect our citizens from the pandemic, led by His Majesty himself.

By lifting existing restrictions, which will be done in phases, we are convinced there is enough room and opportunity to wage forward, without risking the spread of coronavirus.

Our surveillance system is smart enough to tackle the consequence of a local transmission, in the event of which, instructions for additional restrictions will be immediately issued to prevent spread and we are certain about our people's compliance. This adds to the efficiency of our system and has given us the confidence to chart the course ahead.

To begin with, the government is starting with critical sectors and services that are essential for us, while also ensuring economic activities and wellbeing of our people.

All in all, our journey hereon is about deriving opportunities, and reaping benefits and fruit of untold sacrifices of His Majesty The King and hard work of our people on the frontlines.

In stating this, we are given the imagery of a child cradled in delight, oblivious to the surrounding secured by his father who sweats day in and out to keep him safe, while the mother spends sleepless nights in attending the health and wellbeing of the child.

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With this, we bring to notice the first phase of our journey in transition to a new normal.

Phase one

Schools, institutes and colleges: Starting July 1, 2020

- For education, Classes X and XII will resume for critical reasons to go to higher levels where they choose their subject specialisation and colleges.
- Classes VII, VIII, IX and XI will resume in the subsequent phases, about which the government will announce in time.
- In the event of local transmission, it is the children of lower classes who have higher risks, for being unable to understand and follow the COVID-19 safety norms.

Therefore, students of pre-primary until Class VI will not undergo campus education this year. They will continue with online and other teaching modalities prepared by Ministry of Education. The students will be assessed based on key learning through a smart system designed by the ministry.

- All classes of technical and vocational education training (TVET) institutes will start from the specified date. Since all institutes operate on campus with boarding facilities, and the need to train on site, TVET institutes are safe to resume under present circumstances.
- Private technical and vocational institutes, including driving and tailoring, since they operate in small numbers without protracted contact.
- Although delayed, RUB will ensure final year students resume campus study and prepare for graduation, while first and second year students will continue online classes and adopted assessments.
- Subsequently, intakes in civil service, corporate offices and private sector will follow undisrupted.

Note:

- All students on campus are required to wear masks.
- School administrations and managements of institutes and colleges will prepare the campus in keeping with COVID-19 safety and prevention guidelines and protocols.

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Businesses: starting July 1, 2020

- Except for those specified under for later phases, all businesses will resume with extension of closing time from 7pm to 9pm.
- Karaoke, drayangs, night clubs, pubs and movie theaters will be considered in the subsequent phases. Although not the case today, the risk of spread of the disease in these establishments are higher.
- Informal businesses and street vendors will be allowed to operate. All vendors must wear face masks.

Note:

- To refrain from going out, people are advised to avail of services that have delivery and are online.
- All business must follow COVID-19 prevention and safety guidelines and protocols. They must ensure adequate distance among customers and disallow crowding at all times.

Sports: starting tomorrow

- All sports centres – stadiums, gyms, yoga, dance studios, rubber tracks and facilities for traditional games – will reopen.
- No tournaments or spectators will be allowed. Sports and fitness facilities should ensure minimum attendance at a time. For archery, it will be 15 people. No dancers or onlookers will be allowed.

Note:

- Druk Trace app, or manual registration will have to be in place for record keeping. All hygiene and sanitation provisions should be in place.

Offices: starting Monday (June 22)

- All government, corporate and allied agencies to formally discontinue “work from home”. RCSC may consider exceptions if need be.
- Agencies are also encouraged to minimise interactions and continue using technology for meetings and other official correspondences.

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Trainings and workshops

- All government, corporate and private entities are encouraged to opt for virtual meetings and conferences.
- Trainings and workshops held in facilities, if not possible online, should limit the number of people and follow COVID norms.

Religious and social functions

- Religious functions and social events like *tendrels*, birthdays and inaugurals will be limited to family members and close circle of associates.
- All religious sites will open. The site in-charge should monitor and discourage crowd. All visitors to follow COVID norms.

Parks and public spaces

- All parks and public places will open. Authorities will monitor and disallow huge gatherings.

Public transport

- Taxis and other public transports can carry passengers to full seating capacity.
- All passengers must use face masks. It is optional for drivers, as it could pose inconvenience and risks, particularly for long journey.

Conclusion

It is His Majesty's leadership, today as in all other times, that has helped the country steer clear of challenges as grave and delicate. In personally spearheading the preparedness for the pandemic, the government and the people of Bhutan derive immense sense of peace and security.

We would like to thank every organisation, institute and individual for their support in response to the situation so far. We would like to thank media for ensuring clear communication and swift updates for the people in these times.

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We extend special gratitude to frontline workers, who, we understand will have more responsibilities to shoulder as we allow more activities while stepping up surveillance.

We are thankful to all our volunteers, including De-suups. Your spirit and dedication for the country is highly appreciated. It is indeed a lifetime opportunity to be able to come forward to serve the country when in need. Please continue to protect our people and communities.

Meanwhile, Bhutan continues to remain in highest preventive mode. Should there be any unpleasant development, government will immediately step in with tough and severe measures.

In subsequent phases, the government will review and inform, in about a month, its considerations on other restrictions, gauging from developments on the ground.

For reopening classes VII, VIII, IX and XI, the government is exploring possibilities of allowing students in separate groups on alternate days of the week to discourage crowding.

By the time we enter phase three, our pandemic-triggered mode of approach will be, the so-called, “new normal”. It is obvious there will not be a clear distinction or a line to draw between now and post COVID. It could be a year, or two or five or ten.

The relaxations of these restrictions don’t mean extra risk of local transmission. Without a distinct delineation between now and post-COVID, these initiatives will enable us to, at least, reduce our wait for the pandemic to abate.

Now that it has entered the dictionary of medical diagnosis, the disease will remain. Therefore, unless we claim the “new normal”, we cannot continue to wait for the right time to arrive. All individuals will have to start embracing the change and live with it.

Alongside the adjustments we are making today, let us all work together to go beyond conventional thinking and conventional ways of life.

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Important:

- The government encourages using masks at all gatherings.
- All individuals have to follow COVID protocols, opt to stay home and stay safe.
- All above conditions will change should there be an evidence of local transmission.
- The government will also step up health surveillance to ensure tempering down of the measures do not compromise prevention efforts.

Through this press release, relevant authorities are asked to ensure strict compliance.

**From the Prime Minister
Prime Minister's Office
Thimphu**

