

April 17th 2020

The fight against Covid-19

Introduction

It's been one month since St.Vincent and the Grenadines recorded its first Covid-19 case, on March 11th, 2020. That person, an imported case, has since recovered, and in fact has posted an article about the quarantine/isolation experience, which makes good reading.

The Covid-19 pandemic has engulfed the world, and given the interconnectedness of transportation, economic activities, trade and global communications, every country on this earth, including those in the Caribbean, will be touched in some way. We all follow the American media on cable, so we can see the explosion of Covid-19 cases all over the world, and we see the struggles of foreign governments and their health agencies, at this time.

In St.Vincent and the Grenadines, as of April 13th 2020, we have recorded twelve cases among the eighty seven tests conducted by our hard working health officials. There are about 164 persons who are still in quarantine, down from 465 earlier in the month. There are no Covid-19 related deaths in the State, and no health worker, be it a doctor, a nurse, or a nursing assistant, has been affected by the Covid-19 virus. This is truly remarkable as compared with the rest of Caricom, and it says something positive about the way the ULP administration has approach this crisis.

The Government's Approach

The ULP administration has not been complacent in the way it approached the Covid-19 pandemic. The government has followed the science, acting prudently on the advice provided by the health professionals in the Ministry of Health and Wellness.

All this is anchored in the advice offered by the World Health Organisation, the Pan American Health Organisation, and the Caribbean Public Health Agency. Additionally, the ULP administration has been able to distil from the experiences of other countries, so as to shape appropriate responses to our local situation.

On March 25th 2020, in his address to the nation, Prime Minister Dr. Ralph Gonsalves said "The central fact is that Covid-19 is a serious disease to be addressed seriously and scientifically, not complacently but also not hysterically". This is very astute. We have to manage the risks in a cautious but sensible way, avoiding over-reaction and under-reaction. The ULP administration understands

that the real threat of Covid-19, has resulted in a huge challenge to all countries, challenges that will affect us in a number of ways.

Prime Minister Dr. Ralph Gonsalves has outlined four dimensions to this crisis, which crisscross each other to some extent. To begin with, there is the health dimension, and the Ministry of Health has already adopted a professional approach in this manner, including the quarantine and isolation of persons from known countries. There is enhanced surveillance at ports of entry which are open, and relevant laws have been amended to support this process.

The Ministry of Health has also issued several advisories aimed at managing and containing Covid-19 in the State. These relate to the practice of good and safe hygiene, physical distancing, and serious personal responsibility. The government has also responded by providing more assets for the fight against Covid-19, including the construction of an isolation centre, and the identification of quarantine facilities.

Another dimension of this crisis relates to the economic stimulus that has to be applied, in light of the fact that the local economy will be undermined. The travel and tourism sector will be hard hit, due to the fact that airlines are not flying and cruise ships are not sailing. The trade in goods and services is experiencing a huge down turn and remittances are dwindling.

The ULP administration has designed and obtained parliamentary approval for an economic stimulus package, in excess of EC \$70 million dollars. This package will contain targeted measures to support the disadvantaged person, and those of us who will face temporary difficulties due to the presence of Covid-19. A number of state agencies including the National Insurance Services, the CWSA, Vinlec, and the Bank of St.Vincent and the Grenadines are expected to contribute to this dimension. Details in relation to this stimulus have been provided elsewhere.

The final dimensions relate to the health and learning of our children, and the security of our citizens. This is a challenging time for our children, especially those who are preparing for the various examinations this year. A certain amount of e-learning will be done in relation to CPEA and CXC examinations, but the Ministry of Education may have to make some adjustments.

The ULP administration is very much alive to the fact that a tiny minority of our citizens might use this opportunity to undermine the peacefulness of our lives and living. This will not be tolerated, and the government is prepared to implement tried and tested modes of policing, to cope with any eventuality.

Conclusion

There are those among us, especially supporters and members of the opposition New Democratic Party, who see the Covid-19 pandemic, as “Christmas coming early”, believing that this is the time to obtain political capital for the 2020 General Elections. Nothing could be further from the truth, and Dr. Friday and the leadership of the NDP, will soon realize that there is no capital, political or otherwise, to be gained from this crisis.

Again, to quote Dr. Ralph Gonsalves, “Throughout this difficult, testing and complex time of Covid-19, I have sought to remain calm, resolute, and focused, in providing leadership without succumbing to panic, hysteria and futile histrionics”.

Covid-19 will bring out the best in our Vincentian people, and we will rise stronger than ever from the feverish ashes of this crisis.