

FROM: Hon. Haruna Iddrisu, MP
Minority Leader

TO: Rt. Hon. Prof. Mike Ocquaye
Speaker of Parliament

DATE: March 20th, 2020

SUBJECT: Developing a Bipartisan National Response to COVID-19

CC: Hon. Joseph Osei Owusu, MP
First Deputy Speaker

Hon. Alban Bagbin, MP
2nd Deputy Speaker

Hon. Osei Kyei Mensah Bonsu, MP
Majority Leader

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic presents to our nation an unprecedented public health challenge that is matched in its seriousness by the attendant social, economic, industrial, and financial risks. Ghana's defenses have been penetrated, and the moment finds us unprepared.

There is still time to act, but our window of opportunity is narrow and closing. The decisions our national leadership makes at this critical juncture - and the actions we take in our individual lives - will determine what impact COVID-19 will ultimately have on our dear Ghana.

If we are to prevail in the fight against this disease, we must all accept that there will be collective difficulties and a need for personal sacrifice. We must accept that some of the steps we must now take will have profound, long-term implications for the very organization of our society. And we must accept that these are extraordinary times, and that they call for extraordinary measures.

We in the Minority, reflecting on our core values, believe that the nation is presented with an opportunity to rebuild solidarity, deepen our sense of community, revive our capacity for community self-organization, and to reassert healthy values. Importantly, this is an opportunity for our democratic institutions - from Parliament to the District Assemblies - to prove themselves worthy of the people's mandate, and to rededicate themselves to the people's cause.

Our flagbearer, H.E. John Dramani Mahama, has previously averred the commitment of the entire National Democratic Congress, and his own personal resolve, to support President Akufo Addo and his government in this fight by availing all technical and logistical resources at our disposal. We assure your good self that the Minority will provide constructive, substantive, and proactive support for the appropriate policy and legislative measures that are required to preserve our society in the face of this

crisis. We extend that assurance, in sincerity and solidarity, to our colleagues in the Majority. In this matter of our national response to the COVID-19 pandemic, our desire is for Parliament to speak with one voice. We urge the rapid development of the necessary consultative protocols to facilitate this.

We must state, however, our conviction that the introduction of the proposed Imposition of Restrictions Bill by the Presidency is premature and unnecessary. A single draconian measure of this kind is limited in its utility and myopic in its constitutional considerations. It fails the test of the moment in its lack of comprehensiveness and specificity with respect to the COVID-19 threat and its multi sectoral impacts, while assigning the Executive broad authorities that undermine the most basic principles of democratic jurisprudence. It is our view that the 2012 Public Health Act (Act 851) already delineates - upon the requisite declarations by the Honorable Minister of Health - all the necessary powers to manage the present crisis. In view of that, we remain open to discussing whatever supplementary legislation may be required to support those critical elements of an effective national response plan that are not adequately provided for in Act 851.

For Parliament to move forward on a bipartisan basis it will be necessary to debate a comprehensive, multi-sectoral, national response plan. The moment in which Ghana finds itself calls for a proactive plan that goes beyond occasional lists of reactionary measures. We will need to review the underlying epidemiological and statistical analyses that inform the proposed interventions, and the same applies to the strategic plan for executing those interventions .

We need to understand what financial and human resources are available for this campaign, as well as the applicable legal and institutional frameworks. We need clarity on the constraints to planning and implementing this national response, and we need a mechanism for monitoring and evaluation that will allow for informed adjustments as the situation evolves. Only the Executive Branch can provide such details of any plan. To date, the Executive has shared no such a plan with Parliament and, regrettably, does not as yet appear to have one.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our caucus has had extensive discussions of these matters internally, and we have sought the counsel of a nonpartisan, multisectoral and multigenerational team of experts from the many fields that will be required to implement a national action plan. Their technical expertise informs the Minority's views on the nature and needs of a national response to the COVID-19 threat. It is our view, consequently, that any national response plan must be consistent with the known epidemiology of the virus and the resulting disease. It must be rooted in the best available medical science, considerate of our nation's political economy, and contextualized for the culture of our society. Without in any way seeking to preempt Executive Privilege in this matter we wish to propose, through your Office, the following priorities for consideration:

- The national plan must prioritize and cost responses over a realistic analytical horizon that reflects the epidemiology of the disease and the projected therapeutic timelines. The best available information suggests that this pandemic will only truly end with the discovery of a vaccine or a cure, and the present estimates of either product range from 12 to 18 months. The underlying strategy must be costed with this timeframe in mind and must be accompanied by a detailed rationale for the specific

appropriations. It must also be clear on any and all additional powers that Government may need that are not enshrined in Act 851. Our caucus is committed to approving the justified legislation, borrowing and spending within that temporal and constitutional framework.

- The national plan must address the requisite behavioral and medical interventions needed to contain the spread of the virus, and to mitigate its consequences for affected persons. This must necessarily encompass the following:
 - an aggressive public education campaign on preventive behaviors that is centered on hand hygiene that details proper handwashing, avoidance of face touching, and the use of appropriate commercial or home-made hand sanitizers;
 - a multilingual, contextually competent awareness campaign of the signs, symptoms and severity of a COVID-19 infection that communicates preparedness over panic;
 - a nationwide procurement strategy for the urgently needed medical equipment and supplies to support the clinical case management of symptomatic individuals - including logistics for testing, triage and intensive care - that is appropriately tied to local industrial capacity;
 - an emergency staffing and training plan for healthcare workers to boost their availability and preparedness around the country, and a set of guidelines for clinical admission and treatment protocols (including task shifting and deprioritization of elective care) that enhances flexibility of care delivery in the healthcare system;
 - a revised infection detection plan that allows for rapid identification of potential cases at all points of entry, as well as tracking and tracing of community transmission events;
 - an immediate plan for increasing the availability and capacity of isolation and quarantine centers, including a plan for operationalizing dormant capacity at specialized facilities such as the University of Ghana Medical Center and the Bank of Ghana Hospital.
- The national response plan must provide comprehensive and equitable safety nets for the disabled and the elderly, unemployed persons and daily wage workers, and all other persons whose financial security may be jeopardized by the necessary social distancing measures. The current rhetoric from the Executive, which recommends such alternatives as ordering food from restaurants, is overly focused on the lifestyle of the wealthy and well-connected. It must expand its scope to consider the economic realities and living standards for many millions of our compatriots who do not share in that privilege, including such “pro-poor” measures as:
 - cost-of-living interventions like the provision of rent subsidies or freezes, and deferrals of tax payments;
 - retail market interventions to suppress hoarding, price speculation, and other opportunistic behaviors, including price-fixing and rationing of food and basic supplies if necessary.
- The national response plan must address the broad range of predictable economic impacts on small-, medium- and large-scale enterprises who may be exposed to disruptive supply and demand shocks.

The strategy should offer incentives to those businesses that provide essential goods and services such as the manufacture and supply of food, pharmaceuticals and communications. And it must consider monetary and fiscal impacts, including temporary relief measures for enterprises such as credit guarantees and temporary loan forgiveness.

- The national response plan must include a mass mobilisation programme that embraces the core competencies of democratic, traditional, religious and civic structures across all levels of our national life. This will necessarily involve engaging and empowering District Assemblies, Unit Committees, traditional and religious leaders, civil society organizations, and other appropriate entities.
- The national response plan must include a detailed communication strategy with both digital and traditional components. It must be focused on the efficient transmission of critical information, absolute transparency about the evolving situation, and responding to the proliferation of false information and fake cures. Ultimately, such a plan must strengthen solidarity, social responsibility and social engagement even in the face of social distancing.

In view of the expert counsel we have received and the abovementioned recommendations thereof, we believe that the proposed Imposition of Restrictions Bill is uncalled for. It fails in its substance to address the clinical demands of the underlying public health emergency. It fails in its foresight by ignoring the predictable impacts COVID-19 will have on our social and economic life. It fails in its constitutional responsibilities by subjugating due process to the whims of a single individual. The most important priorities of the needed national response are completely unaddressed, while extraneous matters such as hate speech feature prominently.

CONCLUSION

Our call for a set of comprehensive measures will be a true test of our country's character. But in rising to that challenge, we have an opportunity to revive our self-confidence as a people, and to attain new heights in our national unity. We in the Minority sincerely believe that bipartisan Parliamentary cooperation and leadership along the aforementioned lines will determine Ghana's ability to meet the COVID-19 challenge successfully while minimizing the attendant social and economic consequences of the critical public health interventions. Our collective priority must be to safeguard our national social development and to preserve the lives of our people. This is no time for partisanship and political grandstanding, which the Government's proposal seeks to portray. We reiterate our resolve to work with our colleagues in the Majority, under your able leadership, to contribute our energies and efforts to this national endeavour. We are, of course, immediately available to engage on these proposals. Please accept our warmest compliments.