

Briefing on the outcome of the Cabinet meeting on Measures to respond to COVID-19 Pandemic

I. The Current Situation of the Novel Corona virus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic:

1. Situation around the world:

The outbreak of COVID-19 began in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, the People's Republic of China at the end of 2019. To date, China has been able to contain the COVID-19 outbreak and furthermore it has been providing assistance to countries that are now facing the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to spread widely in many countries across the regions and the world where the most heavily affected countries are in Europe (Italy, France, Spain) as well as in Iran. Based on the statistical data as of 06:00 AM of 18th March 2020, more than 165 countries are facing the COVID-19 outbreak with 199,092 confirmed COVID-19 cases, of which 7,966 deaths and 81,109 recovered.

On 12 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared this Public Health Emergency – a pandemic and urged countries around the world to step up surveillance, prevention, control and response measures (*against COVID-19*).

2. Situation in the Lao PDR:

While there are no confirmed COVID-19 cases in the Lao PDR, our country remains highly vulnerable as the country shares border with 5 countries and there are many travelers from countries that have reported COVID-19 cases. Nevertheless, the Government (of the Lao PDR) is focusing on preventive and response measures, including preparedness in many areas to the possible case of COVID-19 in the future.

II. Past Measures

Since January 2020, the Government (of the Lao PDR) has undertaken initial preventive and response measures (*against COVID-19*) as follows:

1. The Government has established a National Prevention, Control and Response Task-Force Committee on COVID-19 with the Deputy Prime Minister Somdy Duangdy as the Head of the Committee, comprising of relevant ministries. The Committee has carried out its duties with high responsibilities – which includes:
 - Raising awareness among the public on the danger of the COVID-19 and how to prevent and reduce the risk of infection;
 - Imposing strict quarantine on travelers entering Lao PDR by screening body temperature and separating those with suspected COVID-19 from the general public in order to reduce the risk of transmission;
 - Anyone with symptoms under the criteria for suspected COVID-19 will be tested and result of the diagnosis will be confirmed accordingly;
 - Ensuring the preparedness of hospitals with isolation room for suspected COVID-19 patients and treatment in case of any confirmed cases.
 - Providing *clinical* training for doctors, nurses and staffs through simulation exercises in response to COVID-19.
2. The Government has allocated a budget for the purchase of medical facemask, hand sanitizer and medical equipment required for the prevention and control against the COVID-19.
3. Adoption of measure for price control on facemask, hand sanitizer and medical equipment by designating these items as controlled goods.
4. Tasking the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Planning and Investment to organize a seminar to discuss with relevant agencies and private sector on the impact of COVID-19 as well as to propose economic measures in response to the aforementioned impact.

III. Measures to be taken in the coming months:

Based on the current situation on the ground and the risk of COVID-19 outbreak in Lao PDR and in view of preventing and responding to the possible outbreak, the Government will continue its previous measures and adopt additional measures as follows:

1. Preventive Measures:

- 1) Close all “local” and “customary” border checkpoints across the country. As for international border checkpoints, only those that fully ensured and equipped necessary equipment and staffs for standardized screening and detecting suspected infected person will be allowed to open.
- 2) Suspend the issuance of all kind of visa on arrival, including E-Visa and tourist visas for all nationals for the next 30 days. For those who already have obtained an entry visa to Laos, they must also attach a health certificate and a historical record of his\her activities over the past 14 days before entering Laos. As for visa exemption countries, the Government has decided to temporarily suspend such exemption until further notice, except those who hold diplomatic and official passport.
- 3) Avoid travelling abroad in this period, especially by air and mass transportation.
- 4) Those travelling from a country with an outbreak must take self-quarantine for at least 14 days, in order to self-monitor their health conditions with a sense of ownership and high responsibilities to the society. In case of a fever, it is advisable to immediately notify doctors and relevant authorities (details have been provided in the official notice of the Taskforce Committee number 012/CTF, dated 16 March 2020).
- 5) Avoid large gatherings that involve large numbers of people, such as: traditional and customary festivals and events, trade shows, sporting events, weddings, various activities in celebration of the Lao New Year and others.

6) Close all entertainment businesses, karaoke and massage services, but other businesses may operate as usual but must have basic precautionary and preventive measures such as temperature scans and hand-sanitizers for customers to protect themselves and others.

7) Temporarily close all nurseries, pre-schools, primary schools and all academic and educational institutions (public and private) across the country until further notice. In the mean time, there must be coordination with all schools for an urgent consultation and discussion to identify policy or instructions on how to promote teaching and learning through online, television, radio, newspaper and others.

8) Designate a 14-day quarantine area for inbound travelers from high-risk countries, including Lao workers and students returning home for the Lao New Year festival (There will be a separate instruction for the Lao migrant workers)

9) Advise all Lao nationals currently stay abroad to postpone their return home, until the global pandemic situation is under control.

2. Preventive measures:

1) Improve the center for information under the Taskforce Committee in order to effectively lead the prevention, control and response to the infection outbreak, and for the exchange of information, double check for its accuracy and provision of correct information in a swiftly and timely manner with regard to the outbreak of COVID-19 situation domestically, regionally and internationally;

2) Disseminate information and knowledge on the danger and risk of infection, as well as providing instructions on how to self-protect, prevent and access to health services.

3) Raise awareness and educate the entire society to take ownership in protecting themselves and avoiding the risks of

infection such as avoiding travelling abroad, avoiding risky places, and crowded places. If avoidance is not possible then one must follow self-protection instructions as announced by the public health sector such as: wear facemask, frequently wash hands with sanitizer or soap, practice hygienic living and eating, cover your mouth when sneezing or coughing and other measures as instructed by relevant authorities.

3. Treatment measures in case of confirmed infection:

1) The designated places for treatment of those infected in Vientiane Capital are 103 Hospital, Mittapharp Hospital (150 Beds Hospital), Mahosod Hospital and Xaysetha Hospital. As for the provinces, the Provincial Hospitals are designated as venues for treatment, but it needs to designate a separate section for treatment from others.

2) There must be preparedness of sufficient doctors and nurses with well trained to be able to respond to the real situation in case of any infection. At the same time, there must be coordination and seeking assistance in advance from experts and experienced doctors from friendly countries and international organizations as a precaution in case of necessity.

3) Identified the actual needs for tools and equipment and proposed plan for acquisition, especially medical facemask, hand sanitizer, protective gear and other necessary equipment. Any equipment that deem necessary to request for assistance from international organizations or friendly countries must be immediately proposed to the Government for consideration.

4) Procurement of vaccine and new medication for treatment is needed when they are available abroad, by immediately requesting for purchasing or some donation from friendly countries for the preparation for treatment of the infected person.

4. Follow-up, screening, surveillance and situation assessment measures:

1) Improve the Taskforce Committee for prevention, control and response to the mentioned disease by revising the roles and adding some more relevant sectors;

2) Improve and enhance the information center for COVID-19 in order to be able to coordinate, exchange of information, cross check for the accuracy of the information and provide information about the outbreak, prevention, protection and response to the outbreak in a correct and timely manner, including the creation of a website as an effective tool of the committee to provide information, coordination, consultation, collection of important information within the country and abroad and international organization with regard to the outbreak. More importantly, the Taskforce Committee's Website is aimed to monitor and provide official information about the real situation and measures adopted as well as to clarify doubts and prevent fake information that caused social panic.

5. Economic Measure:

The Government has assigned H.E. Mr. Sonexay SIPHANDON, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Planning and Investment as a Chair of the Committee for the study and evaluation of the impact of COVID-19 on the economy with regard to the measures proposed to this Government's meeting, by consulting with relevant and private sectors and to propose updated economic measures that will be announced thereafter.

6. Other measures:

1) Inform the public and people not to be panic and over react to the outbreak that can complicated the situation, such as stockpile withholding of consumer goods and false criticism.

There will be strict measures on any opportunist who withholds stockpile of goods, especially necessary basic goods such as, facemask, hand sanitizer, medication, medical equipment and others.

2) Strengthen the monitoring measure and implement strict measure on those who created social disturbances or cause misunderstanding, such as: release fake news via social media platform and other channels;

3) Encourage and promote domestic products, especially consumer goods that may be lacking when there is an imposed restriction on export by other, by taking the advantage of this opportunity to enhance the resilience of self-reliance and efficiency;

4) Continue to coordinate, exchange information and mobilize further cooperation and support from the international community, in particular in the areas that are necessary, but we are not yet well equipped with.

The above-mentioned measures will be reviewed and improved based on the new available scientific information and the latest update situation, and taking into account the study and consultation with experts, relevant sectors, local authorities and the opinion of the society.

The Taskforce Committee, all related sectors and all society are to take full ownership to carry out measures into detail activities for its effectiveness. In addition, the Taskforce Committee has to closely monitor and evaluate the result of the implementation of these measures with the aim to improve or adjust the measures accordingly as appropriate to the real situation of each period.