



Cayman Islands Government

STATEMENT TO

THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

BY

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MINISTER FOR HEALTH, SPORTS,
YOUTH, AND CULTURE

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Statement by Health Minister Hon Osbourne Bodden on the Cayman Islands' Preparations for the Ebola Virus

Thank you Madam Speaker

I would like to take this opportunity to update the members of this Honourable House on the Government's preparations for the Ebola virus.

As Members will be aware, there has been an outbreak of the Ebola virus in four West African countries, where we have seen the death of thousands of people from this virus. The severity of the situation caused the World Health Organisation to declare Ebola "an international public health emergency", only the third time in its history that the WHO has made such a declaration.

Madam Speaker, while we were monitoring the situation, and already making our preparations, the situation became more urgent for us when we learned that this often fatal disease has reached the shores of our close neighbor, and largest trade and travel partner, the United States.

Madam Speaker, I am sure that you and the other Members of this Honourable House share my concern that I felt when I learned that the United States had a case of Ebola, and additional since last evening a Doctor from New York has also been diagnosed with Ebola, however I want to take this opportunity to reassure you all, and urge you to remain calm.

As I mentioned, Madam Speaker, we had already been watching it closely and had commenced work on refining our contingency and response plans, however upon learning that it has reached the United States we accelerated our work.

Honourable Members of this House may already be aware that at this week's Cabinet meeting my colleagues and I had a presentation from the technical team regarding the ongoing preparations.

Following the presentation, it was decided by Cabinet to implement a travel ban whereby any persons who have visited Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, or the Democratic Republic of the Congo within the past 21 days will not be allowed entry to the Cayman Islands.

In addition to the travel ban, Madam Speaker, we are actively reviewing and considering our options to further enhance our state of readiness. Cabinet has agreed to allocate the necessary funds for the acquisition of a purpose-built isolation unit and additional personal protective equipment, or "PPE", that will be required should we have the need to isolate or quarantine individuals.

The Health Services Authority has been in touch with their overseas contacts to arrange for staff to receive specialized training to ensure the correct use of this PPE. Madam Speaker, while we are all concerned about the potential threat of Ebola, I am pleased to advise the Members of this Honourable House that after the presentation from the technical team on Tuesday, my colleagues and I were reassured by the clear evidence of inter-agency collaboration and cooperation. Further, Madam Speaker, after meeting with the technical team and discussing our level of readiness and plans going forward, we are confident that as a country we are on the right path in our approach.

Madam Speaker, I want to emphasize that while we made some significant decisions this week, work has been underway for several weeks to ensure the Cayman Islands are prepared.

With the full support of my Ministry, Cabinet and the Governor's Office, Government officials, from 13 agencies have been working together to finalise our preparation and response plans, with a view to preventing the Ebola virus from taking hold on our shores.

These stakeholders are in regular communication and have developed a joined-up approach that involves refining existing preparedness plans and procedures, to satisfy the protocols necessary to contain the virus.

Madam Speaker, this multi-sectoral committee has considered a range of matters to date, including entry screening protocols, contact tracing, and contingency plans that cover issues such as: transportation, isolation and quarantine, case management and infection control measures.

Membership includes Public Health, the Health Services Authority, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Home Affairs, Hazard Management Cayman Islands, Environmental Health, the Royal Cayman Islands Police Service, the Cayman Islands Airports Authority, the Port Authority, Immigration, Customs, the Department of Tourism and Government Information Services.

Medical Officer of Health, Dr Kiran Kumar, who heads the committee, describes inter-agency cooperation and communication to date as extremely productive.

Madam Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Kumar and all of the members of the multi-sectoral committee for their efforts to date. Through outstanding inter-agency communication and co-operation they have been able to make tremendous progress towards achieving a state of readiness for the Cayman Islands.

I want to commend them, Madam Speaker, and encourage them to continue to work together as we continually review and refine our plans.

On October 17th, the Immigration Department, in conjunction with the Public Health department, introduced a traveler's health questionnaire that will address passengers' travel patterns for four weeks prior to their arrival in the Cayman Islands. Madam Speaker, if this questionnaire reveals that the traveler has been to any of the three affected West African countries, our Ebola protocols will be triggered. The cruise lines have distributed similar health questionnaires to passengers before they embark, and there are established procedures and protocols whereby a passenger who becomes unwell is not permitted to disembark.

If the passenger has a travel history to one of the affected countries and appears well, the person will be placed in the Public Health office in the airport arrival hall, and the H.S.A team will be contacted. If the person is unwell, staff will call 911.

An emergency medical services (EMS) team will assess the passenger through a Health Screening questionnaire that will elicit exposure history. They will also take that person's temperature.

A passenger who does not have any fever or other symptoms, and is a visitor, will be denied entry and quarantined until departure.

If a resident, the passenger will have an option to be quarantined in a designated place at the Cayman Islands Hospital, or in their own home supervised by security guards, if all household members were also passengers, or if living alone.

If quarantined in the Hospital – the individual will also be watched by a security guard, and arrangements will be made for daily needs to be met in a manner similar to any inpatient of the Hospital. Similar arrangements will assist the daily needs of persons quarantined at home.

Quarantine notice will be served by the Medical Officer of Health. Passengers will also receive information about the reasons for quarantine, the Ebola virus, and how to self-monitor for signs of the illness.

Quarantined persons will be instructed to inform their security guard, or contact the telephone number on the quarantine notice, if they become unwell at any time, or for any concern or need.

During quarantine period, the Public Health team will monitor the person's temperature twice a day. If at any time the person has a temperature of 101°F, they will be moved to an isolation room and managed as a suspect case.

Madam Speaker, the HSA has adequate protective gear for Hospital staff, should a suspect case arise, and is in the process of procuring additional supplies. As I mentioned earlier, the H.S.A. is organizing training through an overseas facility regarding the use of the PPE, and will also be offering staff webinars in all aspects of managing the virus.

The threat of Ebola is a global one, Madam Speaker, and we have the benefit of looking to other jurisdictions to learn from their experiences regarding their preparations and management of the virus.

To that end, Madam Speaker, in addition to overseeing local precautions, the Public Health Department, on behalf of Government, routinely communicates with international agencies such the Caribbean Public Health Agency, the Pan American Health Organization, the Centers for Disease Control and Public Health England.

Madam Speaker, Members will be aware that before the Ebola threat we already had a robust communicable disease surveillance system, which has been recognized for its excellence by some of our international partners. I want to thank the Premier and Minister of Home Affairs, Hon. Alden McLaughlin, for publicly expressing his confidence in our existing communicable disease surveillance system, and assure him that his confidence is well-placed.

In closing, Madam Speaker, I want to be clear that while I do not believe there is cause for alarm, we simply cannot afford to be complacent. As the Minister of Health, I am committed to keeping the public, the Governor, the Premier and my Cabinet colleagues informed of any new developments on this front.

As we continue with our preparations, my ministry is committed to providing the public with regular updates concerning our efforts. With the support of my colleagues in Cabinet, and the continued sterling efforts of our technical team, I am confident that the Cayman Islands will be prepared to deal with this threat should it arrive on our shores. Thank you Madam Speaker.

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