

The Virgin Islands Consortium

British Virgin Islands Restricts Gatherings to 30, Bans Certain Visitors and Closes Schools in Sweeping Action to Blunt Coronavirus Outbreak

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Tortola, British Virgin Islands By. ANGELA BURNS FOR VI CONSORTIUM

TORTOLA, BVI — Premier Andrew A. Fahie has announced a restriction on the categories of passengers who will be allowed to enter the British Virgin Islands, effective Thursday.

This was one of the sweeping arrangements decided by cabinet and announced during a press conference Tuesday evening, called to update the public on the government's efforts to mitigate the spread of the Coronavirus COVID-19 in the territory.

A March 15th date was announced last week as government instituted a 30-day ban on cruise ships effective March 13th.

Statistics provided by John Hopkins University as of early Wednesday, reveal that the pathogen has so far infected 198,171 people and killed 7,954.

To date, the BVI does not have a confirmed case of the virus, although 22 suspected cases were identified and quarantined as of March 16. Fifteen persons were tested last week and all 15 results were negative.

“Cabinet endorsed that the entry into the British Virgin Islands by sea or air be prohibited with effect from Thursday 19 for all passengers who are not nationals, belongers, work permit holders or persons ordinarily resident in the territory or their dependents,” Mr. Fahie announced.

This travel restriction will not apply to flight crews, diplomats or freight, cargo or courier craft or vessels.

The restriction specifically targets visitors and crew members to the BVI who are not nationals, belongers, work permit holders or persons ordinarily resident in the territory, or their dependents and permanent residents, who have traveled to, from or through countries specified on the Special Interest Group List and the Very High Risk Country List within a period of 14 days or less.

Countries of Special Interest are China, South Korea, Iran, Italy, France, Spain and Germany. On the Very High Risk Country List are the United States of America, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Norway, Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium, Austria, Denmark and Japan.

Meanwhile, countries tagged on the medium high risk list are Malaysia, Australia, Portugal, Qatar, Canada, Greece, Czechia, Finland, Singapore, Slovenia, Bahrain and Israel, while low to medium risk countries are Estonia, Ireland, Poland, Philippines, Hong Kong, Romania, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Thailand, India, Kuwait and San Marino.

These lists are reviewed daily.

“The safety and well-being of our Virgin Islands people and residents are your government’s highest priority, as we continue to monitor regional and international developments with respect to the Coronavirus COVID-19,” the BVI premier stated.

He said a number of precautionary measures will be enforced to prevent the virus from entering these borders.

The BVI is one of few Caribbean countries that has implemented measures to locally test for the virus, allowing quicker access to test results in order to be more proactive. Tests are sent to Trinidad and Tobago for verification.

Last week, the decision was taken by government to limit international travel and heighten screening for persons arriving at the Terrence B. Lettsome International Airport and the Road Town and West End ferry terminals on Tortola.

Mindful of the impact these decisions will have on the BVI's economy, government officials have been meeting with taxi operators, vendors and other stakeholders, including supermarket operators, wholesalers, importers, banks and insurance companies.

The government has also established a "Coronavirus Economic and Fiscal Sustainability Taskforce" to monitor and analyze the situation and devise strategies for the BVI to successfully overcome any challenges.

In addition, the cabinet, which is made up of the British Governor and all local government ministers, continues to meet daily and there are regular meetings of the Health Emergency Operations Center, to ensure the highest level of preparedness.

The BVI leader said approximately \$3 million has been allocated to ensure the procurement of supplies and to put the necessary structure in place to properly manage this pandemic.

In other sweeping changes, the cabinet agreed that visits to and from Her Majesty's Prison are restricted mandatorily for a period of 30 days with the exception of emergency situations and all facilities that serve as residential establishments, such as the Adina Donovan Home for the Elderly, Virgin Gorda Elderly Home, Rainbow Children's Home, Safe Haven Transitional Center and other private residential facilities, are also advised to prohibit visits except for emergency situations.

Meantime, all private and public schools, pre-schools, day care centers and extra-curricular activities are mandated to close effective Thursday for 14 days in the first instance.

All social gatherings, including weddings and funerals, faith-based, sporting, cultural, recreational and commercial activities and other non-essential events, must also be restricted in numbers to a maximum 30 persons at a time, and 10 for those in vulnerable categories, also effective Thursday, for a period of 30 days.

The stringent measures also extend to restaurants, bars, night clubs and other entertainment and hospitality services, who are advised by the Ministry of Health and Social Development to implement sanitization and social distancing measures within their establishments.

Premier Fahie told the people of the British Virgin Islands they should take all necessary precautions to protect themselves, by practicing social distancing, regular hand washing, avoiding touching the face and covering of the mouth when coughing.

He reminded persons who might feel sick not to go to the doctor but call the medical hotline at 284-852- 7650.