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Speech

Speech of An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar TD, Post Cabinet Statement, Tuesday 24 March 2020

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Good afternoon.

This morning, the Cabinet met to decide on the next steps that the government will take to respond to the Coronavirus Emergency.

These are unprecedented actions to respond to an unprecedented emergency.

We agreed action in three areas.

This morning the NPHET met and has recommended some new actions to help us slow the virus. We have accepted its advice and it will be published today in accordance with standard practice.

Above all, today I want to thank the people of Ireland for listening to our advice when it comes to physical distancing, regular handwashing, taking care when sneezing and coughing, and reducing the number of social events and gatherings you attend. It's too early to know for sure, but we believe it is making a difference.

However, we now believe we need to do more. We need to flatten the curve and suppress this virus.

So, I am asking you to stay home if at all possible. That is the best way to slow the virus, ensure our hospitals are not overwhelmed and buy us the time we need to build more capacity - testing, contact tracing, beds, ventilators.

So, you should only leave home to go to work if you can't work from home and your attendance is essential. You should only go to the shops for essential supplies, out for medical or dental appointments, to care for others or to take physical exercise.

Non-essential indoor visits to other people's homes should be avoided. Social gatherings of individuals outdoors should be of no more than 4, unless you are all from same household.

We are in this for long haul.

This could go on for weeks or months and we need to maintain our humanity, we need to see our families and loved ones and look after our mental and physical health. And we can do it if we maintain a physical distance of 2 metres or more.

No unnecessary travel should take place within the country or overseas, now or over the Easter break.

In order to assist all of this, the restrictions I announced in Washington DC are being extended until Sunday 19 April.

All scheduled cruise ship travel will cease.

Any setting that should close has been specifically identified.

The requirement that workers work from home, unless attendance is absolutely essential, is not to be read as meaning that factories or construction sites have to shut. The authorities are available to work with employers and unions on how to make physical distancing effective.

There will be an increased presence of park rangers and Gardaí in parks and public places to ensure physical distancing is being observed. In Ireland, since independence, we have always had policing by consent rather than coercion. I don't intend for that to change now. That's not our way. The new powers afforded to the Gardaí will be used sparingly and only when necessary.

Let's all play our part and ensure they are not used at all.

I believe a liberal democracy can do this without the need for authoritarian or draconian actions.

The impact of COVID-19 on our economy and employment has been sudden and will be enormous.

I believe we need to maintain social solidarity, unity and a sense of community in this time of trial.

In recognition of the fact that so many fellow citizens have lost their jobs so suddenly, we are raising the COVID Unemployment Payment to €350 a week. This is approximately 75% of average earnings in the sectors most affected, and compares favourably to what is being done in other countries. The first payments will be made on Friday.

The COVID Illness Benefit will also increase to €350 per week and can be topped up by employers. This will be paid to people self-isolating.

We also approved a framework agreement with the private hospitals. They will operate effectively as public hospitals under Section 38 of the Health Act for the duration of the Emergency thus adding over two thousand beds, 9 laboratories, critical care capacity and thousands of staff to our health service.

Private and public patients will be treated equally and the private hospitals have agreed to do this on a not-for-profit basis. I want to thank them for their co-operation.

I briefed the leaders of the other parties yesterday and we will be briefing spokespeople today and during the week. In contrast to what we have seen in some other countries, our political parties have united against a common foe and I want to thank them for their understanding, goodwill and co-operation to date.

Finally another reminder to everyone to follow the public health advice and to keep following the five key steps. They might seem simple, but they are vital to protect us all: regular hand washing, coughing etiquette, not touching your face, physical distance, and staying at home if feeling unwell.

We cannot yet stop this virus but working together we can slow it in its tracks and push it back. These are extraordinarily difficult times for everyone – in Ireland and around the world. But no matter what happens, we will always put your life and your health ahead of any other concern.

All our resources are being deployed in this great national effort. And I know that the Irish people will continue to face this head-on, to make the changes that are required, and will pull through to the other side.

Four years ago we commemorated the 1916 Rising and we celebrated the men and women who helped us win our freedom and our independence.

I never believed that we would be called upon to match their courage, or their example.

Today we are.

Working together our country will come through this Emergency. We will be

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