

Statement by Minister of Health Mr Constantinos Ioannou regarding the announcement of the new measures against the pandemic

I would like to wish everyone a happy new year in safety and health, two valuable goods threatened in recent months by the unprecedented pandemic. You all understand the seriousness of the situation and the critical moments. I am sure you're following what's going on in the rest of the world. Unlike the first wave of the pandemic, the immediate goal is no longer to eliminate the cases and eradicate the virus, but to drastically reduce incidents and contain the number of hospitalized patients at controlled levels in order to give breathing space to the Health System.

Since the summer we have maintained several restrictive measures, which have helped us to control the spread of the virus and prepare for this new wave. We have taken additional measures of a local character, as well as targeted measures, in an attempt to limit the spread of the virus and protect our vulnerable fellow citizens.

Unfortunately, the result shows that not all measures have been effective to a desired degree for many reasons. For months there has been a superhuman effort, day and night, under very difficult circumstances. Thanks to this effort, Cyprus has been able to buy time to safeguard the Health System, which we have strengthened with staff, infrastructure and consumables. However, as we have said many times, all of this has a limit. We are already on the red line and we need drastic measures so as to avoid the undesirable, namely to see people die helpless, because we have no beds available. We do not want to ever go through this, we will not allow it to happen and we will do everything we can to prevent it.

I won't tire you with statistics and numbers. After hearing the recommendations of the Scientific Advisory Committee, the Council of Ministers, in the framework of contain the spread of the pandemic, decided to implement stricter measures to limit gatherings and movement. The new measures will apply from Sunday,

January 10, 2020, at 5 a.m. and until 31 January at midnight. In fact, for the next three weeks, we'll have to stay in our homes, in our shelters, to stop the spread of the virus. The effort aims to drastically limit social and professional meetings in homes and workplaces, because that is where most cases are detected.

In general and indicatively, the new measures provide for the following:

- Curfew from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. of the next day.
- Prohibition of meetings, public or social events (regardless of private or public area, or interior or exterior areas).
- Prohibition of meetings in public outdoor areas, such as squares, dams, picnic sites, marinas, etc., except for exercise purposes in parks, linear parks and beaches, provided that they do not exceed two persons.
- Movement is permitted only by text message and up to two text messages per day per person. The reasons that apply for movement of citizens will be given in detail immediately after the conference.
- Compulsory teleworking in the public and wider public sector and local government with the exception of Essential Services, which are included in the Decree to be issued during the day.
- The Divine Liturgy in the temples/areas of religious worship is performed without the presence of believers. Believers may come to the premises only for individual prayer, provided that the observance of the health protocols will be ensured. Religious ceremonies, weddings/christenings/funerals are celebrated with a maximum of 10 people.
- Businesses which do not suspend their operations include, inter alia, construction sites and construction-related enterprises, the manufacturing sector, beverage and food retailers and other retailers to be designated by the Ministry of Labour.
- The private enterprises/services that remain in operation will promote teleworking, with a regulation for simultaneous physical presence of 15 % of their staff, with a maximum number of employees who may be physically present at 20 persons per professional premise.

- Businesses with suspended operations include, inter alia, the following: barbershops and hair salons, beauty salons, tattoo parlors, theatres, cinemas, performance halls, outdoor amphitheatres, catering establishments and entertainment halls, shopping malls, department stores, playgrounds, gyms, dance schools, other related schools.
- Teaching at all education levels will be carried out through distance learning, in accordance with the guidelines sent to schools by the Ministry of Education.
- Nurseries, pre-schools and pre-primary and special education schools remain in operation.
- Matches of the professional championships of the First Division are allowed to take place without the presence of spectators. All other championships, as well as the sporting activities of persons under the age of 18, are suspended. Divisions' B and C athletes will be able to train with relevant arrangements.

In tandem with the above measures, our strategy foresees the carrying out of even more diagnostic tests, in order to have a fuller picture of the epidemiological situation in the community. At the same time, besides the population check programme through rapid testing, additional targeted checks in private businesses and the public and wider public sector will be put into action.

In the next three weeks and the period after that, we will continue the vaccination program according to plan in order to cover the vulnerable groups of the population. As you are aware, so far two vaccines have been authorized out of the six agreements concluded by the European Commission, and thus Cyprus. Until the authorization of the remaining vaccines, the rate of vaccination is in fact slow. However, the aim is to vaccinate a vital section of the population, frontline professionals and our compatriots who fall in the high-risk category, in order to be able to deal with the coronavirus with more confidence and efficiency. We must not be complacent though until we see the desired results from the vaccinations, since those who are now being vaccinated will develop immunity in February.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The second wave of the pandemic is much faster than the first, which scientists attribute to the new strain of the virus, which was also found in Cyprus. The rapid spread of the virus multiplies cases, resulting in more people in need of hospitalization. The increase in patients who are hospitalized and especially those who are in need of specialized care in an Intensive Care Unit, is the crucial indicator which determines the decisions of all governments in all countries plagued by the health crisis. The measures we are taking today aim to reduce this indicator to safety levels in order for us to be able to provide quality health services to those who need them. Adopting restrictive measures is not an end in itself. We have exhausted all possibilities before we got to the restrictions we are announcing today, but unfortunately the options are limited.

Since the very beginning, the Government has set as its objective to safeguard the most precious commodity which is public health and to minimize the loss of our compatriots' lives due to the virus. With this in mind, we have made these decisions in order to avoid the nightmare that we have seen other countries go through. It is a one-way street for all of us to continue the effort, to support health professionals, to give the Health System a break, to guard our fellow human beings who are in danger, to protect our loved ones.

We mustn't let the sacrifices that have been made since the beginning of this pandemic, go to waste. Let us gather our strength to overcome this ordeal.

(MKY/MPO/MK)