

Press Release: Initiating The Unlocking Phases

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ROYAL GOVERNMENT OF BHUTAN
PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE



August 31, 2020

Press release

Initiating the unlocking phases

Bhutan witnessed the first of a kind lockdown to combat spread of coronavirus in the country on August 11. Today, 21 days on, we are confident to state that our lockdown measures have been successful.

And this underscores the very essence of being Bhutanese.

The government would like to thank each and every individual for staying home, and more so for keeping your problems and frustrations locked in with yourself. We are aware of your sacrifices.

Inconvenience on one hand, the 21-day lockdown has accelerated the downturn of already ailing economy. We are aware that you have lost your income, compromised your businesses and livelihood.

Nevertheless, no country in the world would have been blessed with such solidarity and support from the people in such times. The three weeks have been that of a learning, understanding and coming together for the nation that dealt with the disease that made inroads over time.

As people stayed home, playing a responsible part in breaking the chain of possible transmission of COVID-19, our health sector and all others in the frontline stepped up to manage and protect the country from the disease.

It is only with the combination of a well designed, effective lockdown, and reliable and freely available tests that we can fight back this disease.

And in this fight, with His Majesty The King leading, every one of you have played your role. With such energy and spirit binding the force, we are confident that we can win this battle.

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His Majesty has constantly reminded us that it is too harsh for such lockdowns to be imposed on our people, who are wise and responsible citizens. The government must ensure at all costs to lessen the frequency of such lockdowns.

Which means, our unlocking approaches should be well calculated, balancing our acts while mindful of the epidemiological reality around us.

The lockdown period of 21 days was considered from the proven virology knowledge that most infections are restored in three weeks. Even if one has been infected by the virus, you would recover by the end of the three weeks, thus breaking the chain. Your staying indoor would have prevented it from passing on to more vulnerable members of the society.

Our experience from the mandatory 21 days quarantine period also gives us the confidence.

Going ahead, experiences in many countries reveal a surge in the COVID-19 cases, mostly detected in the second week of post lockdown. Which is why, our re-opening strategies should be gradual.

The disease is here to stay and government will always emphasise health and safety of our people above everything else.

But at the same time, all of us have to don new habits and responsibilities. Only then, can we find meaning and fulfillment in the new ways of life, while ensuring our loved ones are safe and healthy.

Epidemic status

Since the lockdown on August 11, 111 new positive cases were detected. Besides the Gelephu case, that triggered the nationwide lockdown, surge in cases rendered Phuentsholing as "red zone", and subsequent contacts testing positive also put Paro and Haa on country's COVID-19 map.

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Following situational analysis, the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) confirms that despite the surge in the number of positive cases, there is no widespread community outbreak. The new positive cases are mostly from confined clusters and quarantine facilities.

While the risk continues, experts with TAG advises highest level of precaution as government explores measures to ease the lockdown and make lives more comfortable for our people.

Three phases of unlocking

In an attempt to make the lockdown more endurable, while also streamlining the processes, many initiatives were introduced over the weeks to ease lockdown. It included allowing individual movement within the zones and gewogs, among others.

Learning from experience, this will now be recorded in the lockdown stages, the document of which will be shared with public soon.

The unlocking episode is being considered in three phases, spreading over a total of ten days from September 1-10.

Phase one of unlocking (September 1-3) will allow more relaxation of essential activities, opening of more designated shops and restaurants, while allowing families to walk in super-zones. Further easing will be carried out in phase two (September 4-6), as movement public transport within the dzongkhags will be encouraged.

In the final phase (September 7) of unlocking, private car movements will be allowed. Starting 5am, September 11, movement of vehicles beyond the district is allowed but with prior permission from Royal Bhutan Police.

All the easing initiatives should lead to a new normal that is conducive for our society to operate economic and livelihood activities while also ensuring safety of our health.

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Further, we will strengthen vigilance along our borders and ensure augmented safety for trading interactions. Special and additional measures will be introduced in the high risk areas to protect the community.

Additional tier of protection to avoid spillage of the disease from high risk to lesser risk communities will be ensured.

Unlocking activities (The activities are not applicable to Phuenstsholing, Gelephu, Samdrupjongkhar and Samtse)

1. Movement

- Starting 5am, September 1, 2020, individuals or families will be allowed to come out of their homes. However, for the first three days, they are only allowed to walk or cycle.
- You should practice physical distancing, unless you are assisting an elderly or a child in the family.
- Starting 5am, September 4, only public transports such as buses and taxis will be allowed to carry passengers at 50 percent capacity within the Dzongkhag.
- Starting 5am, September 7, movement of all vehicles will be allowed within the Dzongkhag. However, vehicles should carry only 50 percent of passenger capacity, unless carrying minors and elderlies from the same family.
- Local authorities and taskforces will continue to facilitate transfer of stranded passengers as per the existing practice.
- Starting 5am, September 11, movement of vehicles beyond the district is allowed, but with prior permission from Royal Bhutan Police.

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- Institutions that include RBA, RBP, RBG, IMTRAT and DANTAK will operate in self- containment in the 10 days of unlocking period.

2. Workplaces

- Starting September 7, all offices should open and operate fulltime.
- Until then, management should prepare for offices to operate within the COVID-19 norms. Strict physical distancing at workplaces should be ensured and options to "work from home" or in shifts should introduced.

3. Business entities

- Additional shops catering to essentials like grocery and pharmaceutical can open. However, shopkeepers must continue to practice the COVID-19 safety protocols. Given the associated risk, the government recommends opening of shops only if necessary.
- Only those eateries and restaurants that have delivery or take-away services can tomorrow. There should not be any sit-in customers at all times.
- All business entities must close by 9pm.

4. Sports

- Only non-contact sports such as badminton and tennis are allowed. However, some sports like swimming, archery and snooker that involve exposure and close contact are disallowed during the unlocking phase.
- Tournament of any kind is disallowed during the unlocking phase.
- Bhutan Olympic Committee will determine the list of sports that are permissible during the phases.

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5. Public gathering

- No social events like birthday, wedding, promotions, official dinners and functions will be allowed until further notice.
- Cremation and funeral rites will be limited to close family circles, as authorised by the local authorities.
- No outdoor activities like picnic, hiking, visiting spiritual sites are allowed in this period.

6. Construction

- Construction works will be allowed. However, activities must be limited within the premises, workers must live at site, and their ration and essentials should be provided for.
- Transport of raw materials to worksites will be allowed only after the third day, when movement of vehicles with are permitted.

7. Schools, colleges and institutes

- All schools, colleges and institutes will remain closed while the government will carefully assess and prepare for the reopening starting tomorrow.
- Health experts will assess the situation after 10 days. For schools, should the situation favour, classes XI and XI will also be opened along with classes X and XII.

Introduction of zones in Phuentsholing, Samtse, Gelephu and Samdrupjongkhar

Unlike the rest of the districts, the dzongkhag throms of Phuentsholing, Samtse, Gelephu and Samdrupjongkhar will introduce zoning system in the coming days.

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While some throms have completed distribution of movement cards and will start tomorrow, others will initiate soon after all households receive the cards.

Conclusion

As we allow more relaxations, our hope is for people of Bhutan to exhibit similar maturity and responsibility. We have to be vigilant, and mindful that the virus is on our land. It is not visible to our eyes, so it is only through right actions and behaviour that we can protect ourselves and our loved ones.

On the government's part, to ensure subsequent lockdown measures for prevention of transmission of the disease, are more familiar and predictable, thus helping our people to know what to expect and prepare accordingly, the government will release the lockdown routemap soon.

Meanwhile, the government appeals to all public to follow COVID-19 norms at all times. Wearing of facemask is compulsory. Please observe physical distance and all health advisories.

Note: This press release should serve as notice to the law enforcement agencies to ensure regulation and compliance on the ground.



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