Address by His Excellency Prof. Arthur Peter Mutharika, outlining national response to Covid-19, 4th April.

Fellow Malawians,

On Thursday, I announced that we now have confirmed cases of the Coronavirus disease. The virus has attacked us. Now we have a fourth confirmed case in Blantyre.

An attack on one of us is an attack on us all. This is an attack we must all fight. Either we unite and fight, or we perish!

We are not alone in these tragic times. The whole world is under attack from this deadly virus. Many countries are struggling, many people are suffering and many are dying across the world.

On 20th March, I declared Malawi a State of Disaster on the basis of the Coronavirus attack. I want to thank every Malawian who has been complying with the preventive measures which Government has put in place. Prevention is wiser than cure. Precaution is always wisdom.

(a) We are encouraging every Malawian to observe strict rules of hygiene, including frequent washing of hands with soap and wearing masks;

(b) We are intensifying screening of people in all entry points and surveillance of all travellers from countries that have confirmed coronavirus cases;

(c) We have intensified civic education and information sharing with communities;

(D) We are increasing the number of testing centres in various parts of the country over and above the three laboratories that we have, namely:

(i) the National Health Reference Laboratory in Lilongwe;

(ii) the College of Medicine Laboratory; and

(iii) the Malawi Liverpool Welcome Trust in Blantyre;

These measures are not enough. We need to do more on all fronts.

Coronavirus is a public health problem. It is also an economic threat and a social problem.

I know that everyone is worried but I also know we can survive this problem if we unite and fight.

Today, I therefore announce more measures to be implemented with immediate effect as follows:

1. In order to decongest work places, all offices shall work in shifts with the exception of those working in essential services.

In the public sector, the Chief Secretary to the Government will issue a circular to provide guidelines, while for the private and other sectors, the heads of institutions shall liaise with the Secretary responsible for Labour for guidelines.

All formal meetings, gatherings and conferences are suspended forthwith.

All places, buildings and structures with public access shall ensure that there is adequate ventilation during all periods the public has access to those places, buildings and structures.

All employers shall allow vulnerable employees, including those with underlying medical conditions to work from or stay at home.

In order to decongest our prisons, I direct the Malawi Prison Services and Juvenile Centres to present a list of prisoners and juveniles who committed petty offences and those who have served a significant portion of their sentences for moderate crimes to the Minister of Homeland Security for processing of their release.

I am further directing all affected line Ministries and Local Councils to ensure that they have consulted and engaged their stakeholders such as vendors, market leaders, religious leaders, chiefs and the private sector to agree on sector specific measures and submit them to the Cabinet Committee for my approval within the next 72 hours.

The Coronavirus attack has a huge negative impact on the economy and businesses everywhere. There are many business people and industry players who are uncertain about the situation as it is unfolding.

I know that everyone is worried. Therefore, Government will take measures to protect jobs and incomes, protect businesses, ensure continuity of the supply chain and the survival of the economy.

Let us remember one thing. Malawi’s economy has its own unique characteristics. We are not any other country. At the same time, the situation we have is unprecedented to everyone. With Coronavirus, there are no models except ourselves.

Therefore, it is extremely important that we must be engaging and listening to one another very carefully. Government must listen to the private sector, and the private sector must listen to us – just as I urge employers and employees to listen to one another.

Consequently, I urge the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Industry and Trade as well as the Reserve Bank to constantly keep engaging and listening to the private sector as we develop and review various measures.

Our goal is to protect the private sector, no matter how informal it may be, because our economy cannot survive without the private sector.

Today, I am directing the Malawi Energy Regulatory Authority (MERA) to reduce fuel prices with immediate effect. This move is intended to reduce transport cost.

I am also directing the Treasury to do the following:

(i) Reduce salaries of the President, Cabinet Ministers and Deputy Ministers by 10 percent for three months and direct the resources to the fight against the coronavirus;

(ii) Instruct the Malawi Revenue Authority to open up a voluntary tax compliance window for a period of six months to allow tax payers with arrears to settle their tax obligations in instalments without penalty;

(iii) Provide a special fund to ADMARC to buy agricultural produce at competitive prices;

(IV) Establish a Relief Fund through which well-wishers, companies and individuals can support the fight against Coronavirus;

(5) Apply tax waivers on importation of essential goods for Coronavirus management. These include personal protective equipment, hand sanitizers, soaps, water treatment chemicals and many more;

(6) Waive non tourism levy to support the tourism industry;

(7) Waive Resident tax on all foreign doctors and medical personnel;

(8) Increase the MEDF loans allocation from K13 billion to K15 billion in order to help Micro, Small and Medium Scale businesses that have been seriously affected by the pandemic;

(09) Increase Nutrition Allowance payable to civil servants with foundational medical conditions by 50 percent;

(10)Reduce fees and charges on all electronic money transactions in order to promote use of electronic money transactions;

I am also directing the Ministry of Health to recruit 2,000 health workers to assist in the fight of the pandemic. We need more soldiers and human power in this fight.

I am directing treasury to increase the risk allowances for our health workers as a matter of urgency. The welfare of health care workers is our welfare. Their safety is our safety.

I am directing the Ministry of Agriculture to ensure that Auction Holdings Limited functions normally, to operate the tobacco marketing season and protect tobacco farmers.

Further, I am directing Reserve Bank to:

(1)implement a win-win arrangement with commercial banks and Micro-Finance Institutions to observe a three-month moratorium on interest and principal repayments for all loans contracted by Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises.

Under this arrangement the Registrar will encourage commercial banks to restructure loans to this sector in order to extend their repayment to more than a year;

(2) cushion the foreign exchange market to ensure availability of forex and stability of the foreign exchange rate;

(3) activate an Emergency Liquidity Assistance framework to support banks in the event of worsening liquidity conditions and to provide support to banks on a case by case basis.

I am also directing Government to discuss with Malawi Confederation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry and the Tourism Association of Malawi for win-win arrangements that will ensure that there are no redundancies in companies.

As we speak, I have discussed with SADC, COMESA and other regional trade blocks as well as neighbouring countries to ensure smooth transportation and importation of essential goods and raw materials into Malawi.

Finally, I hereby direct the Competition and Fair Trading Commission to increase surveillance and protect consumers from anyone who wants to unfairly increase prices of essential goods.

People who intend to take advantage of our current situation will be punished. I will not allow anyone to make profit out of the suffering of Malawians due to Corona virus.

Government shall continue to monitor the implementation of these new and existing measures and review the situation as it develops. More comprehensive measures may be imposed.

I want to thank Development Partners for your support and standing with us as a country. Most of you are serving Malawians when your own families and loved ones are in equally demanding situations in your home countries. I appreciate your sacrifice.

In conclusion, I would like us to unite and stand steadfast in these trying times. Together, we can win the war against Coronavirus. Let us not politicize this pandemic.

I thank you for your attention.

God bless Malawi