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Gambia: Citizens escalate matters to National Assembly Members- to reconvene and show urgent action and leadership in combating COVID-19

Gambia citizens and home and abroad escalate request to National Assembly representatives, after a deadline by President Barrow to appear in public and address the nation went unheeded yesterday

Banjul- 11 August, 2020 -About 1000 people signed an urgent letter of appeal to the NA calling it to urgently convene an extraordinary session of the full house of the Assembly through Section 98 subsection 1(a)(ii) of the Constitution and Section 11(3)(c) of the Standing Orders. The appeal stated that: 'The country is in crises, and the National Assembly must take urgent steps and perform its oversight duties by bringing order to a fragmented and dangerous situation, where people are needlessly dying, due to the ineffective, and poor COVID-19 response strategy employed by the Executive.' It further asked the National Assembly elevate principles and practice of accountability, efficiency, effectiveness and transparency by applying these to the Executive, in its oversight function, in their quest to scrutinize the management of the COVID-19 response. "We strongly hold that the Gambia Government is not providing the necessary and quality leadership and management for the effective and efficient containment of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Gambia in a transparent and accountable manner", the letter stated. However, the issue of President Barrow appearing before the Assembly tops the list of seven demands advanced. Albeit that Barrow tested negative for COVID-19, but is in self-isolation.

"Self-isolation cannot be an excuse for inaction, and [being] missing in action. There is technology that can be used to communicate; in fact, that is now the norm, given the circumstances. Aside from the health crisis, we are now faced with an economic; political; social; and possible security crisis. Barrow has not shown, nor taken any initiative to even attempt to take the country into his confidence and this attitude is no longer tolerable", said Jeggan Grey-Johnson, one of the campaigners.

The letter to the NA also pointed to the sharp rise of COVID infections: *'The rate at which COVID 19 is spreading poses a present and clear danger to the very existence of The Gambia for which there is an urgent need to mobilize and organize all citizens and institutions to confront this menace. Ultimately, it is the National Assembly, which bears the primary responsibility to monitor and support the Executive to ensure that it carries out its functions to address the challenges facing the country. It is precisely for this reason that we are of the view that where the Executive is unable to adequately perform its sacred duty in salvaging the nation, then the National Assembly Members should assume their full responsibilities and powers to support the Assembly save the nation and her peoples.'* A view that points to a total failure in leadership from the Executive.

"The dismissive attitude and total disdain being demonstrated by the President towards Gambians, is shocking, and unacceptable, especially at a time when the country needs leadership. We have therefore escalated matters to the National Assembly to compel the Adama Barrow to appear before the legislative body and subject himself to be held to account over the way he has handled the COVID-19 response," said Nacesay Marenah, an organizer of the campaign.

The letter requests the NA to address the following:

1. To request that the Head of State and President of the Republic, Adama Barrow, address the National Assembly on the current health disaster the country faces;
2. To inquire into the reasons and circumstances of the poor quality of leadership from the President and the Cabinet in the fight against COVID 19;
3. To appraise the state of COVID 19 prevalence in The Gambia and determine what steps are required to contain it;
4. To determine if the current response by the Ministry of Health and other sectors is adequate or not to contain COVID 19;
5. To demand transparency and accountability for the financial and material resources approved by the National Assembly, to combat COVID-19, and allocated to various sectors by the Ministry of Finance.
6. To determine if these resources were efficiently, effectively and judiciously utilized;
7. To determine the next steps that the National Assembly should take to ensure that there is an effective and efficient response from the Government in the fight against COVID 19.

End

Background:

At least seven prominent civil society formations had penned an open letter to Adama Barrow on Friday 7 August, 2020, urging him to show leadership at a time when the populace is experiencing a pandemic, which has brought untold misery, destruction of lives and livelihoods to hundreds of thousands. This is further compounded with runaway infection rates, a broken health system and a devastated economy. The CSOs gave the President 72 hours to appear before the nation and give an account as to the next steps to be taken by government in dealing with this stage of the pandemic. President Barrow, had not been seen in public for almost 21 days, even though he is said to have tested negative for COVID-19, but was self-isolating. COVID-19 cases in Gambia have surged over 60% in the last seven days. As of Friday 7 August, (the country is in a backlog of obtaining up to date cases and there is a lag time of 3-4 days), Gambia recorded 1,346. More than a hundred frontline workers have been infected. The infections, and possibly the deaths, could have been prevented had the staff been adequately protected, and had the working conditions been conducive to shield them from fatigue, and unnecessary exposure in the line of duty. It is reported that more than 20% of the doctors have been infected. Gambia has about 200 doctors. The economy has taken a battering, as the unemployment rate in the seasonal sectors, like the hospitality industry, and other mainstream sectors like SMEs have been shaken to the core. Lives and livelihoods have been destroyed, as poverty rates have spiraled out of control. A proclamation shutting the country's borders and airspace amid a rise in coronavirus cases was announced on 5 August. A night curfew from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m, for 21 days, starting Thursday 6 August was announced, and is currently in effect.

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