

31 July 2020

Ministers responsible for European Affairs
Health Ministers
Home Affairs Ministers



Malta's concerns related to the total number of COVID-19 active cases

I refer to the recent data published by the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) which registered a substantial overnight increase in the 14-day cumulative number of COVID-19 cases per 100,000 in Malta, from around 6 to over 22.

This also led to a substantial increase in the number of active cases, from 34 cases on 27 July to 140 cases on 30 July. I am writing to you in order to provide some context to the interpretation of this data.

The incidence rate in Malta is low and remains stable. We had several successive days in mid-July when we had zero reported cases, despite Malta's broad testing strategy, through which anyone in Malta may get tested for free.

Some small clusters have developed in recent days, however I would like to assure you that we have an effective contact tracing system and that the situation appears to be contained. Social distancing measures, including restrictions on mass events, were reintroduced as of 31 July.

The increase registered by the ECDC is mainly attributable to irregular migrants who were disembarked in Malta, after being rescued in Malta's search and rescue zone. The irregular migrants were rescued from two vessels, 94 were rescued on the 28 July and a further 28 migrants were rescued on the 29 July. 66 of the 94 migrants tested positive on disembarkation, whilst 19 of the 28 migrants also tested positive, this adding 84 cases to the total of Malta's active cases, which is also equivalent to a 150% increase in Malta's active cases.

I would also like to highlight that as per standard procedures:

- a) **Immediate testing and isolation:** Upon arrival in Malta, all irregular migrants who are rescued at sea are immediately being tested for COVID-19 by a nasal swab. They are subject to a fourteen-day mandatory quarantine and are to be held in strict detention conditions in order to eliminate the chances of transmission of COVID-19.

Buses used to transfer migrants have been modified to isolate the driver who is fully donned in PPE including a full face respirator. After use, each bus is decontaminated.

The closed detention centre specifically designed as an isolation unit was inaugurated earlier in the year and was used successfully during the COVID-19 pandemic to house migrants testing positive for the virus. Such strict detention conditions effectively eliminate the chances of transmission of COVID-19. All migrants are also equipped with



masks and provided with sanitary products to help stem cross contamination. Statistics confirm that so far there was not a single case of local transmission through one or more migrants held in detention.

- b) **Public officials involved in sea rescue operations, disembarkation of irregular migrants and accommodation are equipped with personal protective equipment.** Officers undergo rigorous training with regard to infection control and the proper use of PPEs so as to minimise the risk of contagion.

All officials' equipment that is used during the rescue operations is donned prior to the rescue and doffed after the disembarkation; and subsequent decontamination of the vessel used by the migrants.

Officers are also subjected to random swabbing in order to detect any asymptomatic cases. Statistics show that up until 31 July, no officer has tested positive for COVID-19.

Given the above, I would like to reassure you that Malta still has a comparably very low rate of transmission and may thus be deemed a safe destination.

I genuinely hope that all Member States will show solidarity with Malta in the fact of the migration problems that it is facing, together with other Member States, in terms of migration, by not restricting travel to Malta for saving lives at sea.

Sincerely

Mr Chris Fearne
Deputy Prime Minister
Minister for Health

Evarist Bartolo
Minister for Foreign
and European Affairs

Byron Camilleri
Minister for Home Affairs
and National Security