

Television address by Prime Minister Mark Rutte of the Netherlands | Speech | 16-03-2020

Good evening,

Coronavirus has our country in its grip.

Our country and the entire world.

Together we face an enormous task.

In recent weeks many of us have felt like we're on a rollercoaster that seems to be going faster and faster.

Asking ourselves: is this really happening?

After all, the measures taken here and elsewhere are unprecedented in peacetime.

I'd like to begin by expressing my sympathies to the families of those people who have died from the virus.

And I'd like to wish all the very best to everyone who is in hospital or is recuperating at home.

And let me say to those members of the public who are older, or have underlying health issues: I realise that you are very concerned.

That's why I want to assure you that our top priority is to reduce the risk to you as much as we possibly can.

Given all the news both at home and abroad, and all the events unfolding at record speed, it's entirely understandable that people everywhere are concerned.

We all have questions.

What can I do to protect myself and those close to me?

What about school and work?

Can your child's birthday party go ahead? Your family weekend? Your wedding?

How long is this going to go on for?

And why are different countries taking different measures?

In today's world, news and information travel faster than the speed of light, and people are quick to share their opinions.

I understand that.

But in order to answer the many questions people have, we need the knowledge and experience of experts.

Let us rely on that knowledge and experience.

And on experts such as Jaap van Dissel and his colleagues both at the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment and elsewhere.

On the virologists, intensive care doctors and other specialists.

Right from the very beginning, their advice has been the guiding force behind the measures we've taken in the Netherlands so far.

And it's important that we continue to be guided by scientific knowledge and reliable facts.

That is the only sensible way in which we can keep taking the necessary steps.

Steps which inevitably lie ahead.

Because, my message to you this evening is not an easy one to hear.

The reality is that coronavirus is here in our midst, and for the time being it is here to stay.

There is no quick or easy solution to this intensely difficult situation.

The reality is also that in the coming period a large proportion of the Dutch population will become infected with this virus.

That's what the experts are telling us now.

They are also telling us that – as we wait for a vaccine or treatment to be developed – we can delay the spread of the virus and at the same time build up population immunity in a controlled manner.

Let me explain what that entails.

Anyone who has had the virus is usually immune to it afterwards.

Just like with the measles back in the day.

The bigger the group that acquires immunity, the smaller the chance that the virus can make the leap to vulnerable older people or people with underlying health issues.

The aim of population immunity is to build, as it were, a protective wall around this group.

That's the principle.

But it's important to realise that it can take months, or even longer to build up population immunity, and in the meantime we have to protect high-risk groups as much as possible.

If we consider the big picture, there are three possible approaches.

The first is: control the virus as much as possible.

That should lead to a controlled spread among the groups least at risk.

That is the approach we have chosen.

Maximum control means taking measures aimed at reducing the peak in infections and staggering those infections over a longer period.

By taking this approach, one in which most people will experience only minor symptoms, we can both build immunity and ensure that our healthcare system is able to cope.

So that our nursing homes, home care services, hospitals and, above all, our intensive care units don't become overwhelmed.

And so that there's always enough capacity to help the people who need it most.

The second option is that we simply allow the virus to run its course.

If we did that, our healthcare system would be completely swamped when infections peaked, so there wouldn't be enough capacity to help vulnerable older people and other high-risk patients.

And that, of course, is a scenario we must prevent at all cost.

The third option is that we keep working endlessly to contain the virus.

That would mean shutting down the country completely.

Such a rigorous approach may seem like an attractive option, but experts say that this would not be a matter of days or weeks.

In this scenario, we would essentially have to shut the country down for a year or even longer, with all the consequences that would entail.

And even if that were possible in practice – making people stay in their homes unless they have permission to go outside, for such a lengthy period – the virus could simply rear its head again once the measures were lifted.

The Netherlands is an open country.

Until a vaccine is available, coronavirus will continue to sweep the world, and it won't spare the Netherlands.

All the advice we've received, and all the measures we've announced so far, have been aimed at the first approach: controlling the spread as much as possible.

From relatively simple guidelines, such as not shaking hands, washing our hands more often and keeping a distance of one-and-a-half metres, to far-reaching measures such as banning large events and closing bars, clubs and restaurants.

And of course, we are constantly reviewing the situation.

How long these measures need to be in place and whether more measures are necessary will depend on how the virus behaves in the coming weeks and months.

And on new scientific findings, because the research continues apace.

It's possible that some measures can be relaxed, but that we may also have to take new steps to prevent the virus proceeding unchecked.

In the months ahead it will be a matter of adjusting our approach as necessary.

Of striking the right balance between taking measures that are needed and allowing normal life to continue as much as possible.

If we can control the spread of the virus in this way, the public health consequences will be easier to manage in the long run.

At the same time, we cannot and will not ignore the economic impact of this crisis.

Many people are concerned about their jobs.

Because, for many companies, large and small, this is an extremely difficult time.

Many businesspeople suddenly have their backs to the wall.

The lady with the coffee bar on the corner, the flower grower, the independent haulier, the self-employed person.

But even national icons like KLM are feeling the strain.

My message to all business owners in the Netherlands and to all their employees is this: the government will do what is necessary to support you.

We will do everything in our power to ensure that companies do not go under because of this crisis, and that people do not lose their jobs.

Whatever happens, this will be a difficult time.

But we will not let you down.

Lastly, I would like to thank everyone in the Netherlands for the way in which they have heeded the instructions and measures announced so far, and for all the heartwarming examples we've seen of people offering each other their help and solidarity.

It's encouraging to see that when the need arises we are ready to help each other.

Please keep doing that.

Stay alert and follow the instructions, even if you are fit and healthy, for the sake of those who are more vulnerable.

That is extremely important.

Keep using your common sense and listen to what the experts say.

Keep helping each other where possible.

This is a time in which we must find common ground, overcoming our differences and divisions.

A time in which we must put the common interest above our own self-interest.

A time in which we must put our trust in those who are working day and night in difficult conditions to help others and get the virus under control.

We must give them space to work. Cleaners, nurses and doctors in hospitals and elderly care homes, GPs and municipal health workers, police officers, ambulance crews and other emergency workers.

To them, and to all the other people who have stayed at their posts in schools, childcare centres, public transport, supermarkets and elsewhere, I want to say: you are doing a fantastic job – thank you very, very much.

I would like to close with an appeal to you all: despite all the uncertainty, one thing is perfectly clear: the challenge we face is enormous, and all 17 million of us will have to work together to overcome it.

Together we will get through this difficult period.

Take care of each other.

I'm counting on you. Thank you.