

“State of Emergency is over, but the virus remains the same”

Not my words, but those of the Prime Minister António Costa

We are now at a turning point in our fight against the spread of Cov-19 and the first steps towards a return to normality.

The State of Emergency (SoE) is now behind us, as we enter the Situation of Calamity which will be in place until 23.59 hrs 17th May, when it may, or may not, be renewed.

The word “Calamity” may seem more severe, but in fact it is a less intense list of restrictions, suspensions and closures than under the SoE. The last time that this state was declared was during the catastrophic fires that swept through Portugal two years ago, whereas the last SoE was in 1975.

The Government has now announced a three phased approach with the introduction of various measures which will allow businesses, services and schools to reopen.

The President of the Republic Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa said, that the country will enter a third phase of combating the Covid-19 pandemic, in which “closure” is no longer a focus. However, the resumption of activity “in small steps” will have to be accompanied by the control of the situation, with permanent assessment of the data.”

The Prime Minister António Costa has stated transition from a state of emergency to a state of calamity “has risks”. “Each of us has to adopt hygiene and distancing rules, in order to protect ourselves and others. As we reopen some activities, we are aware that the risk will increase”. The situation will be assessed every 15 days. “I will not be ashamed to take a step back if necessary”.

Portugal Situation

From all our close monitoring at Safe Communities Portugal of the situation and our interaction both with government and the community, it is clear that Portugal has handled this unprecedented crisis very well with far fewer deaths per head of population compared for instance to our neighbours Spain.

To me the key steps that have led to this situation were: the clear actions taken from the start by government based on scientific advice; the closure of schools and borders at an early stage; the introduction of the State of Emergency and the ban on inter-municipality travel during Easter and over the Labour Day period and not the least general sense of responsibility, compliance and civic mindedness of the population.

The actions by the health authorities have been resolute and at the early stages personal protective equipment was being imported for health care workers, with further arrivals over the last few weeks. Portugal moved from the containment phase to a mitigation Phase on 25th March, which enabled special measures to be introduced at hospitals to safeguard both the public and the health workers themselves.

As at 29th April Portugal had the 4th highest level of tests per head of population in Europe (*DGS source- 20 countries surveyed*), with the Netherlands and UK in 19th and 20th place respectively. The number who have tragically died at the time of writing is 1023. By comparison France has three times the death rate per head of population, Italy and UK four times and Spain over five times. However this not a league table, but an indicator that Portugal has done well so far in controlling this pandemic. Not everything is perfect but in the extreme circumstances Portugal has done well.

In this third phase with the reopening of activities the risk will increase. So it is important now that we do not take short cuts, during this stage that put in jeopardy, what we have achieved so far.

In other words all of us should comply with the laws that are in place and the official advice of experts. This includes the wearing of facemasks, social distancing – the big three.

A positive note

If there is any positive news from this pandemic is that overall crime has decreased by 50% in the first quarter of the year, the number of rural fires is a small percentage of last year, the air pollution in Lisbon down 60% (2nd April) and people are looking after each other more. Interesting all four are influenced by human behaviour! So when we come out of this let these positive results continue.

The part that Safe Communications Portugal is playing

Our volunteer team of professionals, at Safe Communities Portugal, has been there since day one – our first post was on 20th January.

Since then we have further developed our capacity by creating a core response team: Chris Stretton, Elise Slotte and myself, all of us having crisis management experience. This is supported by a volunteer group of around 15 people including a former UK government health professional, civil protection and cybersecurity specialists, an international lawyer, translators and researchers, all providing input and support services.

Our daily work involves liaising with government and Tourism boards where necessary. We have made proposals to help the foreign community at national and local Algarve level; these being considered and implemented where appropriate.

The focus point of the official information and advice in English is on the Coronavirus Covid-19 section on the SCP website with over 30 pages from daily situation report, legislation, FAQs, contact points, DGS advice, international travel etc. We have Covid-19 information available in nine languages and visits to our site have approached 20,000 per day on some occasions. www.safecommunitiesportugal.com/coronavirus covi-19

We would like to thank everyone that has shared our information on Facebook in some instances individual posts reaching around 40,000. However, not everyone uses social media, so we also use our newsletter to communicate with those who do not.

This shows that within the foreign community we are getting key messages across to the widest audience and we thank everyone who has supported us in doing so.

David Thomas

President

Safe Communities Portugal

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