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LOWER GAS PRICES, SALARY & WAGE INCREASES AMONG A BUNDLE OF SUPPORT INITIATIVES BY GOVERNMENT

As of Monday 31st of October, gasoline at the pumps will be reduced by \$2.10 per gallon and diesel by \$1.00 per gallon. Prime Minister Dr Ralph Gonsalves made this announcement at the annual independence military parade on Thursday.

Dr Gonsalves in his address, said as the nation moves forward from its challenges since 2020, the government notes enhanced benefits and material improvements immediate and prospective; one of which is the establishment of the wages council to review minimum wages which will result in a minimum wage increases from 2023.

At the moment, he added, and continuing to the end of the year, there is income support for 5,400 families across this country and the budget will address a possible further extension of these benefits.

In formally announcing 14 other enhancements, supports and initiatives in different areas, the Prime Minister said as of January 1st 2023, Youth Empowerment

Services (YES) personnel will receive an increase on their stipend by \$150 monthly, so too will the mobilisers and coordinators of the YES programme. The increase, he stated, will cost the treasury in excess of 1 (one) million Eastern Caribbean dollars annually.

Another enhancement is arrangement of a moratorium in respect of the payment by dialysis patients at the Modern Medical and Diagnostic Centre in Georgetown for the four-month period September 1 to December 1 2022. Forty-seven patients will benefit from this, at a cost to the government of 250,000 dollars in consumables, Dr Gonsalves said consideration is being favourably given to extending this into 2023.

Government has also increased the number of National Scholarships, National Exhibitions, Special Awards and Bursaries from sixty-two last year (2021) to seventy-three in 2022; of these, the number of National Scholarships fully funded 5-year scholarships have tripled from seven (7) in 2021 to 21 in 2022, all of these will cost the treasury close to 20 million dollars.

These are in addition to the 940 Tuition Scholarships recently granted by government. “We are investing mightily in our young people, we urge them to soar with their wings unclipped, “the Prime Minister said.

In the area of Agriculture, Dr Gonsalves said 40,000 sacks of Urea will be arriving very shortly for distribution to the farmers, a gift, he pointed out that is from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. There is also a delivery of some 50,000 barrels of oil being delivered at the storage facility at Lowman Hill under the Petro Caribe agreement.

Dr. Gonsalves also announced that he will be meeting today, with the local Petro Caribe representatives as well as those from the St Vincent Electricity Services Limited (VINLEC) to ensure that as a result of the delivery of the fuel, there will shortly be a significant reduction in the electricity bill for consumers.

His administration, the Prime Minister stated, will be continuing with the housing repair and housing construction programme for those affected primarily by the volcanic eruptions last year, in all some 1400 homeowners will benefit.

Dr. Gonsalves said in 2023, Government will be pursuing a comprehensive pension reform plan including a periodic review of the National Insurance Services (NIS) which is likely to lead to an increase in benefits for retirees.

The Government is also rolling out ongoing programmes to support Farmers, Fishers, small and medium size businesses including initiatives targeting women entrepreneurs.

The Prime Minister also announced that by Christmas this year, an aggregate payment will be made of over one million dollars to those who volunteered at various shelters during the volcanic eruptions in 2021. “This practical way of saying thank you is long overdue”, Dr Gonsalves said.

The Prime Minister also said that Government will be giving continued support in the form of subsidies and tax waivers for a range of commodities including brown sugar, flour; fertiliser and cement are also part of the enhancement package and on

November 14 of this year, the duty-free concessions on Christmas barrels will start.

Dr Gonsalves also disclosed that on Wednesday, the Cabinet reconfirmed instructions to officials in the Ministry of Finance to finalise a special allowance to be paid to midwives from January 1, 2023; similarly, suitable arrangements for transportation for nurses are being finalised with urgency.

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