

Pacific Islands nations threatened with disaster by coronavirus

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The remote micro-states and island chains across the Pacific face a terrifying situation due to the global coronavirus pandemic. While geographically isolated, their impoverished, neo-colonial status, lack of health facilities and dependency on tourism make them particularly vulnerable to natural disasters and disease outbreaks.

On March 19, the number of confirmed cases had risen to 11; three in French Polynesia followed by five in the US territory of Guam, two in New Caledonia and one in Fiji. They included Tahitian parliamentarian Maina Sage, whose infection was discovered on her return from France. The Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and Samoa have one person each under investigation. The latter is a traveler from Auckland whose test samples were sent to Melbourne, with a possible 10–20 day turn-around time.

A widespread outbreak of the COVID-19 virus anywhere in the Pacific threatens a disaster for the indigenous populations. They already suffer from diseases associated with poverty and poor diet, such as obesity, heart disease and diabetes. In Fiji, diabetes-related amputations account for 40 percent of all hospital operations. Malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS are rife in Papua New Guinea (PNG), the largest Pacific country, where life expectancy is just 62.8 years.

A sharp reduction in tourist numbers, lack of air freight, and disrupted supply chains are already hitting the island states, prompting fears about how their fragile economies will weather a prolonged crisis. French Polynesia's tourism minister, Nicole Bouteau, said the economy would go through "dark times" in the coming weeks.

To prevent the arrival of the virus, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, French

Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna and Tonga have all implemented strict health checks and quarantine measures. Most countries had limited or suspended cruise ships before the industry announced a worldwide shutdown of operations on March 13.

The Marshall Islands National Disaster Committee closed the country to all incoming passengers for two weeks from early March. Health secretary Jack Niedenthal told Radio NZ the country's health system had already been overburdened with an eight-month dengue fever epidemic.

Cook Islands Prime Minister Henry Puna said 11 cruise ships had been prohibited from the outer islands and travellers from 16 countries banned from entering. Each ship brings in hundreds of thousands of dollars, but Puna said the move was necessary to safeguard "the well-being of the people."

Some of the strictest measures are in Samoa, which was devastated by a measles epidemic that originated in New Zealand last October and killed 83 people, mostly children. Samoa's government is now urging anyone planning to go to the country to stay away, saying the risk to the country from Covid-19 is "very high." A health ministry statement said, "all those intending to travel to Samoa to attend birthdays, weddings, reunions, funerals, conferences, sports, etc. to CANCEL their travel plans."

Samoa Tourism Authority head Fa'amatuainu Lenata'i Suifua said he backed the government's actions but the country's biggest industry was in for "a tough time." Tourism employs more than 5,000 workers directly, as well as others in supporting services.

The measles epidemic in Samoa, which was only brought under control after Christmas, shut down much of the economy and overwhelmed the impoverished

country's limited healthcare system. For the last quarter of the financial year, an estimated 20 to 25 percent drop was already expected for tourist arrivals and earnings.

Quarantine rules announced by Australia and New Zealand will exacerbate the disruption. Both countries, which supply significant numbers of tourists to the Pacific, have mandated that all travelers, including returning residents, self-isolate for 14 days. While New Zealand has exempted travelers from the Pacific Islands, Prime Minister Ardern told people not to undertake unnecessary travel overseas and all cruise ships were banned.

New Zealand's Pacific Island community is particularly vulnerable. COVID-19 hits those with heart and lung disease and diabetes the hardest. Nine percent of Pacific peoples in NZ have been diagnosed with diabetes—three times the general population. The largely working-class Pacific community suffers from overcrowded and inadequate housing and has difficulty accessing health care. Thousands will be affected by looming job losses.

Among the earliest and worst hit islands were the Northern Marianas (CNMI), a US territory in the North Pacific. Beijing promptly suspended all tourist excursions, while South Korea declared quarantine zones. Fifty percent of CNMI's visitors come from Korea and 40 percent from China.

The Saipan Chamber of Commerce declared that the CNMI's tourist industry had collapsed within six weeks. Over 1,000 workers were laid off, while thousands more had hours reduced. The government revised its annual budget down to \$US90 million, from \$147 million. In 2018 the budget was \$237 million. Harsh austerity measures have been imposed, including cuts to public sector pay and working weeks.

In a letter to US President Trump appealing for federal help, CNMI Governor Ralph Torres said the loss of the tourism market would result in the "unequivocal and complete collapse of the foundations of our private sector."

Fiji's government is introducing a supplementary budget this week which Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum declared was necessary to reduce the impact of the coronavirus. Fiji's economy was already facing a major downturn, presaging further attacks by the authoritarian Bainimarama government on wages,

social welfare and essential services. According to reports from the World Bank and IMF last October, a reduction in government expenditure of \$394 million would sharply contract the economy. A liquidity crunch had seen banks struggling to get funds to finance loans while the vital sugarcane industry is battling falling global prices and declining production.

Neelesh Gounder, an economist at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, said the coronavirus outbreak would affect all island countries' wider economic relationships with China, including aid projects and the Belt and Road initiative, which have been hit by delays and quarantine measures preventing Chinese labourers reaching building sites.

With governments around the world failing to act in any coordinated manner, the beleaguered Pacific Island nations will inevitably be left to sink or swim. The local imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, will only do what is necessary to protect their geo-strategic interests in opposition to China.

New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters and Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne said that the two countries would only jointly help to fund the World Health Organisation's Pacific coronavirus response plan. They will assist with access to medical supplies from the WHO's stockpiles and technical advice, including testing samples from the region free of charge.

These meagre undertakings are entirely hollow. New Zealand has had only two laboratories testing for COVID-19, producing about 500 test results in the past week. The ruling elites of both countries are meanwhile carrying through nationalist "fortress" measures and imposing the crisis on their populations. What will not be forthcoming are the billions of dollars in aid and health support desperately needed to rebuild the economies and sustain the health of the people in this fragile region.



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