# Papua New Guinea: 4,000 nurses to strike over COVID-19 readiness

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Four thousand nurses are to strike across Papua New Guinea (PNG) this week over a lack of medical supplies and funding to handle the coronavirus outbreak. The action follows a sit-in by nearly 600 nurses in the capital Port Moresby on March 26 over the failure to provide personal protective equipment for medical staff.

PNG nurses are joining an emerging wave of stoppages, strikes and protests by workers internationally, including nurses in New York City, over the incompetence, unpreparedness and indifference of the ruling elites in the face of the deadly pandemic.

Gibson Siune, the general secretary of the PNG Nurses Association, said the majority of the members, which represents 20 percent of the nursing workforce, would participate in the protests for as long as it takes until their concerns are "heard by the national government."

The association initially raised on March 6 that most hospitals do not have isolation units for handling COVID-19 patients and criticised the inadequate public health measures aimed at controlling the spread of the disease. Nurses are demanding the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), risk and travel allowances, food rations, and insurance as well as proper training to handle COVID-19.

The Pacific country recorded its first confirmed case on 20 March, a mine worker who had arrived from Europe, and was then sent on to Australia for treatment. Authorities have identified another 3,000 "persons of interest," of which 2,230 are being actively monitored.

A 14-day state of emergency was imposed on March 23, placing a curfew on the country's nine million residents and banning travel across the country. Restrictions have been placed on who can speak to the media. A senior doctor, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told the *Guardian Australia*: "PNG is not prepared to fight the virus simply because it does not have the funds to do so," adding that almost all hospitals lack basic medical supplies to attend to even ordinary illnesses.

Prime Minister James Marape has given vague assurances that PPE will be made available. However, the strike reflects wider alarm among the population over the lack of government preparedness to handle the pandemic. One resident told the *Guardian* the lockdown would simply lead to panic buying, while "other unfortunate ones are unable to do that now because they simply do not have the money to buy extra food and basic supplies."

The government is recalling parliament on Thursday, six weeks early, to pass emergency legislation. No details have been released, but an Emergency General Provisions Bill and a proposed Emergency Defence Bill will be tabled, portending ramped-up authoritarian measures.

The developments in PNG come as the COVID-19 pandemic escalates across the Pacific. Last week the US territory of Guam was the first to report a coronavirus fatality with the death of a 68-year-old woman. The number of confirmed cases is climbing every day and currently exceeds 100 across the small Pacific island nations.

The impoverished, neo-colonial status of most Pacific nations, including lack of health facilities, make them particularly vulnerable to disease outbreaks. Samoa's devastating measles epidemic that overwhelmed the health system and killed 83 people last year revealed how exposed they are. Vanuatu has only two respirators, and other countries are similarly poorly-equipped. Many are forced to send COVID-19 samples

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overseas for testing, with long delays for the results.

Guam's total of confirmed COVID-19 cases has risen to 55 with 13 in hospital. A further 36 crew on the aircraft carrier, the USS Theodore Roosevelt, that is docked in Guam with 5,000 people aboard, have tested positive.

French Polynesia, among the worst-affected Pacific territories, declared a curfew from March 28. Until April 15 everyone is required to remain indoors between 8pm and 5am. Anyone breaching the curfew risks being fined at least $US150, and a year in prison. On March 29 the number of people tested positive had risen to 35.

Fiji has four confirmed cases, three from one family including a flight attendant. A nationwide curfew has been imposed while the city of Lautoka is in lockdown with road blocks and patrols. Fiji's military has been mobilised and 100 police checkpoints erected around the country. Dozens of people have been arrested for breaching the lockdown rules. Prime Minister Bainimarama has foreshadowed even harsher measures to control the population.

In Samoa a state of emergency has been declared and borders closed. Public gatherings are restricted to no more than five people. Failure to comply may lead to a fine of up to $US3,400 or imprisonment for two years. Six test results for COVID-19 have returned negative results while seven further samples have been sent to New Zealand for testing.

In Vanuatu the island of Aneityum is in lockdown following reports that passengers or crew from the cruise ship Voyager of the Seas interacted with locals during a visit on March 11-12. Seven passengers who subsequently disembarked the ship in Sydney were diagnosed with COVID-19.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare has suspended all international flights indefinitely and declared the capital an emergency zone. Three suspected cases all tested negative and the government is now working with China to establish in-country testing for COVID-19.

In American Samoa, 42 of 145 passengers who arrived on a Hawaiian Airlines flight from Honolulu last week have been quarantined. More than 100 residents who had earlier travelled to Samoa are also being quarantined.

The Northern Marianas, another US territory, has recorded two cases of COVID-19, while the French territory of New Caledonia has seven confirmed cases. In Tonga a state of emergency has been declared: borders are closed, nightclubs and bars shut and gatherings of more than 20 prohibited.

The Cook Islands' alert status was upgraded on March 25 with the introduction of laws giving health authorities the power to control movements. The provisions were prompted by the surge of cases in New Zealand, to which the Cook Islands had not closed its borders. The major tourist resorts are closing this week, creating a disaster for the industry, with hundreds of staff set to lose their jobs.

The escalating crisis prompted Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to express his concerns, not for the looming health catastrophe facing people in the Pacific, but for the geo-strategic interests of the imperialist powers. Canberra is seeking to use the emergency to buttress Australia's neo-colonial domination of the region amid US-led preparations for war against China.

According to the *Australian Financial Review* on March 28, Morrison warned in a video conference with 20 world leaders that the Pacific islands must receive international support otherwise an "opportunistic China could muscle in to exert stronger influence over vulnerable states in the region." Chinese health officials have reportedly briefed several Pacific nations on how to curtail the deadly virus—a humanitarian move deemed an imminent threat by Australia's ruling elite.

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