

COVID-19 cases increase across Pacific Island states

John Braddock
1 July 2020

The World Health Organisation (WHO) warned last week of an increase of COVID-19 cases across small Pacific Island states. New cases were confirmed in Papua New Guinea (PNG), and in the US territory of Guam, where a fresh spike took the total to 231, which includes five deaths. The number of confirmed cases in the region is 353, an increase of 39 over the previous week.

The WHO says although official infection rates are slowing in the Pacific, the crisis is far from over. While most Pacific nations have few, if any, ongoing cases, the pandemic is only starting to make its presence felt. Should the virus take hold in any of the vulnerable and impoverished island states, with their inadequate health and welfare infrastructure, the results will be dire.

The closure of international borders has shattered economies and the meagre incomes of working people. The *Guardian* has reported that 90 percent of businesses have lost money, and are struggling with the effects of recent natural disasters such as Cyclone Harold. A quarter of businesses are unlikely to survive the pandemic, according to the latest Pacific Trade Invest Business Monitor Report.

The annual Pacific Islands Forum summit, the region's major diplomatic gathering due to be hosted by Vanuatu in August, has been cancelled.

The Trump administration's abject failure to bring COVID-19 under control is adversely affecting US territories across the northwest Pacific. As businesses and social venues reopened on Guam, the island was hit with 35 new cases from a unit recently deployed at the US Andersen air force base. Anger at the military erupted at reports that a group of US airmen absconded from quarantine to visit restaurants and other establishments.

In PNG, restrictions may be re-introduced in the

capital Port Moresby after tests revealed the country's latest case, a 26-year-old woman. A member of the Defence Force with COVID-19 was also found to be infected during mass testing at the Murray Barracks following another case involving a visiting Australian soldier.

Last month Fiji and New Zealand joined 13 Pacific neighbours in declaring themselves virus-free. The Cook Islands relaxed its travel ban with NZ, allowing workers and residents to re-enter. However, the emergence of new cases among people returning to New Zealand, and failures at the country's quarantine facilities, set back similar plans in Samoa. Last year 83 people died when a measles epidemic spread from Auckland to Samoa.

The potential exists for new outbreaks as thousands of Pacific Island seasonal workers are being sent back home from Australia and New Zealand. The NZ air force has started flights to repatriate 1,000 ni-Vanuatu workers while flights for an estimated 7,000 stranded Tongans will start this month. Hundreds of cruise ship workers stuck in isolation for months on board empty ships were finally flown back to Fiji and Vanuatu by operator Carnival Australia.

Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama last week declared he is looking to attract "VIPs" to help restore the collapsed tourist industry. Billionaires who "fly your own jet, rent your own island, and invest millions of dollars in Fiji," he tweeted, "may have a new home to escape the pandemic in paradise." The first planeload of 30 "high-net-worth individuals... from a very well-known company" is due to arrive this week.

The number of infections in the French territories remains unchanged, at 21 for New Caledonia and 60 for French Polynesia. However, the economic cost is highlighted by Air Tahiti axing more than half its 48

domestic destinations, leaving many outlying islands isolated. A spokesman said the economic impact is 10 times worse than that which followed the 2008 financial meltdown.

Evidence continues to emerge that Pacific governments, preparing for an upsurge of social opposition to austerity measures, are using the pandemic to attack fundamental democratic rights.

In Vanuatu, while the opposition was under two-day suspension for boycotting an earlier sitting, an amendment passed through parliament extending a state of emergency indefinitely. The government also abruptly lifted the retirement age from 55 to 60 years.

Lawyer Paul Harricknen told Radio NZ that in PNG the ombudsman should step in after the government gave itself extraordinary new powers under the Public Health Emergency Act, which restrict basic rights for an indefinite period with no parliamentary oversight. Harricknen said the declaration of a “national emergency” was rushed through parliament and should be challenged in the Supreme Court.

The PNG legislation preceded an announcement that thousands of workers will lose their jobs due to an impasse over the huge Porgera gold mine. Canadian company Barrick Gold blames the government’s refusal to extend its mining lease. Barrick and Chinese partner Zijin have shut down production while they challenge the decision in court, and declared 2,650 jobs will be axed by the end of July.

Concerns have been raised about the Tongan government’s plans to spend \$US1.9 million setting up a new security bureau, the Tonga National Security of Information Office, apparently to curb the leaking of government information. It will work closely with state agencies in Australia and New Zealand, and monitor a range of business and political negotiations. A Freedom of Information Act, initially proposed eight years ago, has meanwhile languished.

The Pacific journalists’ association PINA has accused the Cook Islands parliament of gagging the media after several local MPs objected to what they say was incorrect reporting about parliamentary allowances. The Speaker of the House was asked to require a *Cook Islands News* journalist’s withdrawal from parliament.

Financial assistance from international institutions has been both scarce and slow. The Solomon Islands

has secured a meagre \$US20 million from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), split between a concessional loan and grant to help mitigate the economic impacts of the virus. Tonga has received a similarly modest \$US12.2 million from the ADB, following a previous \$US6m injection to fund its border lockdown and relief for the effects of the pandemic. Tonga’s parliament has just passed a \$US260 million budget for the coming year, with a record deficit of over \$US26.4m.

The region’s imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, remain solely concerned with securing their geo-strategic interests and ensuring their continued dominance in what they regard as their semi-colonial “backyard.”

According to documents released in June by the New Zealand government, the Pacific will need “significant investment” to recover from the COVID-19 fallout. The foreign affairs ministry says the region is facing an “array of uncertainties in a significantly altered international environment.”

Far from focusing on the needs of the Pacific nations, however, the paper emphasises a rise in “security risks,” referring to greater opportunities for people smugglers and transnational crime. The ministry’s stated priority, however, is to reinforce the Labour-led government’s “Pacific reset” strategy, which aims to extend its diplomatic and military engagement in the region, in line with Washington’s war drive against China.



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