Ongoing surge in COVID-19 cases across Pacific Island states

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The total number of cases of COVID-19 listed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for Pacific nations is approaching 500 following an increase of more than 48 infections since early July. The main contributor remains the US territory of Guam which, with over 100 active cases, is struggling with a fresh surge of infections.

The WHO has reported over 280 cases on Guam, including five deaths. Multiple cases on the island's huge US military bases are not included in the overall count. There are ongoing tensions over the arrival of COVID-19 through the US military, directly attributable to the Trump administration's policy of allowing the disease to run unchecked.

In April, Captain Brett Crozier of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, stationed on Guam, was fired for demanding that the bulk of his crew be evacuated and quarantined to prevent the spread of the virus. Nearly one quarter of the 4,800 crew was eventually infected. Hundreds of sailors were placed for 14 days in Guam hotels and crowded into the Guam Navy base gym. While most have since recovered from the virus, one serviceman has died. There have also been 35 cases of COVID-19 reported this month at the nearby US Andersen Air Force Base.

The Northern Marianas (CNMI), another US Pacific territory, confirmed four new cases of COVID-19 in the week ending July 17, bringing the total to 37, including two deaths. A CNMI-government imposed State of Emergency is in its seventh month, expected to run until at least mid-August.

In Papua New Guinea (PNG), eleven new COVID-19 cases have been confirmed in the capital Port Moresby. The total number of cases is now 30, over half of them having emerged in the past week. Most of the new cases are health workers at Port Moresby General Hospital where all non-essential services have been suspended. A cancer patient who died at the hospital this week was found by a post-mortem examination to have had the virus—the first COVID-19 linked fatality in Melanesia.

Earlier, the PNG government had announced a cluster outbreak at the Central Public Health Laboratory on the hospital premises, following a previous outbreak at the country's central military barracks. Prime Minister Marape declared COVID-19 is now "prevalent," with community transmission taking hold in the capital and urged all residents to wear masks. Four recent cases have brought Fiji's total to 22. Nine border quarantine cases have been confirmed since July 6, all repatriated citizens from India. More than 160 Fijian soldiers returned negative results after returning from the Middle East last month following a COVID-19 outbreak at the Sinai military camp where they had been stationed.

The far-flung islands of the Pacific have so far escaped high levels of COVID-19. However, the factors that have helped contribute to this—remoteness, small and scattered populations and the difficulties of travel and transport—are currently fuelling a worsening economic and social crisis.

In Fiji, one NGO estimates that half the population of 883,000 is facing "severe" financial distress. In June, the Sofitel Resort sacked 160 staff and the Pullman Resort another 220. The sackings followed more than 1,000 redundancies at Fiji Airways and Air Terminal Services. Overall 115,000 workers—one-third of the country's workforce—have had their hours slashed or lost their jobs.

According to government figures, 86,000 Fijians have accessed relief payments from their pension savings in the National Provident Fund, with another 26,000 ready

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to do so in the next phase of unemployment. Much needed remittances from overseas family members are projected to fall by 15 percent.

Fiji's reserve bank has predicted a contraction of 21.7 percent in the economy, driven largely by the collapse of tourism. The government last week projected a $US1.7 billion budget for the 2020–21 financial year. Minister for Economy Aiyaz Saiyed-Khaiyum said a 20.2 percent increase in the deficit will lift the debt-to-GDP ratio to 83.4 percent. Foreign direct investment is set to plunge 40 percent. A $US930 million stimulus package for business has been announced, along with the restructuring of $US1.6 billion in financial sector loans. Welfare had been increased by a paltry $US6.5m.

Many Pacific governments are seeking to revive their tourist industries, regardless of the risks. While the region's main sources of tourists, Australia and New Zealand, are under lockdown with an upsurge of infections, Fiji is enticing potential visitors with an invitation to "escape the pandemic in paradise." The government has offered 150,000 tourists a "once-in-a-lifetime" travel stipend of $US185 for flights, hotels and meals, plus dropping of quarantine restrictions for arrivals from some countries.

French Polynesia will have an estimated 3,000 visitors this month as the territory opens for international travel and another 7,000 in August, coinciding with France's summer holiday. The first flights from Los Angeles arrived last week after tourists from the US were cleared to enter without needing to quarantine. An online registration system is in place for persons boarding a plane for Tahiti to have cleared a COVID-19 test.

Tahiti's reopening comes despite a decree from Paris banning air travel to and from many of its overseas territories. President Edouard Fritch acknowledged that the COVID-19 crisis had worsened in the US but told *La Depeche* that if French Polynesia didn't open up the consequences would be "catastrophic." He acknowledged the "probability" that there would be more COVID-19 cases.

The Northern Marianas was also scheduled to open for regular international flights last week, but fresh outbreaks of COVID-19 in the CNMI's main tourism markets of China and South Korea forced carriers to abandon their plans. The Commonwealth Ports Authority said a new target date to reopen the international airport has yet to be determined.

The Cook Islands government is holding talks with New Zealand officials, including Deputy PM Winston Peters, to establish a "quarantine-free" travel bubble between the two countries. Ninety percent of the Cook Islands economy relies on tourism. University of Canterbury Academic Michael Plank told Radio NZ that it will be necessary to "tread very carefully" so NZ does not export the virus to the Pacific, which has a high risk of "devastating" health impacts. In Samoa last year, 83 people died in a measles epidemic that originated in Auckland.

The Auckland-based New Zealand Fiji Business Council and other corporate lobbyists, as well as former NZ Labour PM Helen Clark, have been demanding the Ardern-led government relax its border restrictions for "mutual economic benefits." However, the head of the South Pacific Tourism Organisation, Chris Cocker, told Radio NZ that any prospect of a tourism rebound this year has been "written off," adding that a first quarter 2021 resumption was the "best case scenario."

With the virus spreading uncontrolled around the globe and a disastrous financial and economic collapse underway, even this is likely a serious underestimation. The already catastrophic impact on the fragile and impoverished former colonies of the Pacific region is likely to get worse.

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