

COVID-19 takes hold in Papua New Guinea

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After appearing to hold the COVID-19 pandemic at bay for the past several months, the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government last week confirmed dozens of new cases in the capital, Port Moresby. PNG's Pandemic Response Controller David Manning, also announced a new case in Lae, the capital of Morobe province, some 300kms from Port Moresby.

As of August 3, the total number of cases was 110, including three victims hospitalised in critical condition and two deaths. In mid-July, the country had recorded just 11 cases of COVID-19, before then surging to over 30 within a week. Now, 90 percent of cases have been recorded in the past 14 days.

Government modelling suggests more than 5,000 people may have the virus. Only around 10,000 have been tested in a population of nine million and Manning declared the virus is now "widespread" in the capital. His deputy, Acting Health Secretary Dr Paison Dakulala admitted last Thursday that authorities were playing "catch-up" with contact tracing.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has just stepped up its response, deploying more emergency medical staff to strengthen testing capacity and medical supply delivery. Following a request from PNG, Australia dispatched a token eight-member crisis response team.

Many of the recent cases are health workers at the Port Moresby General Hospital, where all non-essential services were suspended. Hospital workers had repeatedly raised concerns about their own safety, the lack of adequate personal protective equipment and staff shortages sparked by the need to quarantine some health workers. The hospital's CEO Paki Molumi said patient care had been affected by the shortages.

Dakulala also warned that the main isolation facility in the capital, the Rita Flynn Centre, can only hold up to 72 patients and is expected to reach capacity. COVID-19 positive patients may be forced to isolate at

home.

Authorities had earlier announced a cluster outbreak at the Central Public Health Laboratory, situated on the hospital grounds, where coronavirus testing is conducted. This followed a previous outbreak at Port Moresby's central military barracks.

With community transmission rapidly taking hold, Prime Minister James Marape announced a two-week lockdown of Port Moresby on July 27, including a curfew under the Pandemic Act. Only essential businesses can open and the curfew runs between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. Schools are closed for 14 days, and no motor vehicles are allowed to operate except taxi services. There is also a ban on all domestic flights from Port Moresby for 14 days.

A PNG academic told Radio New Zealand that without the enforcement of strict health measures it will be "difficult" to contain COVID-19. Henry Ivarature from the Australian National University said the PNG government had "erred" as the recent surge in cases developed. He said it had invested more in a "security approach" than one based on public health policy, and "I think that's coming back to hurt the government now." Manning, who leads the pandemic response unit is, significantly, also the Police Commissioner.

COVID-19 is set to overwhelm the country's fragile and ill-equipped healthcare system. Port Moresby governor Powes Parkop told Australia's ABC that the capital faced "a situation that we dreaded," declaring: "We simply don't have the capacity, we don't have enough space in isolation facilities, in the hospital, we don't have enough medical officers and we don't have enough equipment."

The *Guardian* reported in April that the looming arrival of coronavirus "has terrified the public." The health system, which has just 500 doctors and 5,000 hospital beds, cannot deal with even routine illnesses. The General Hospital has appealed for donations of

face masks, gloves, protective face shields, and hand sanitiser, as well as pillowcases, blankets, mattresses and laundry detergent.

The prospect of the virus spreading in the former Australian colony threatens a catastrophic social crisis. According to Oxfam, 37 percent of the population lives on less than \$US1.25 a day. In Port Moresby tens of thousands live in crowded, unofficial settlements. Malaria, HIV/AIDS, dengue fever, drug-resistant tuberculosis and polio are all rife. More than 60 percent of the population has no access to safe drinking water.

Explosive social struggles will undoubtedly erupt. Repeated strikes by doctors and nurses over the decrepit conditions in the health system have occurred since 2016. Following a sit-in on March 26 by nearly 600 Port Moresby nurses protesting inadequate personal protective equipment, over 4,000 nurses were ready to strike over the lack of preparation for a coronavirus outbreak. The strike was averted by the PNG Nurses Association which, not for the first time, called it off at the last minute.

The deepening crisis in PNG has major implications for the wider region. According to WHO statistics, there are currently some 500 cases scattered across the Pacific. Fiji, the Pacific's second largest country, on Friday confirmed its first COVID related death, among eight active cases. The same day, the number of cases in the Northern Marianas rose by two to 42.

If the virus spreads more widely it could devastate the Pacific Island communities, which have populations with high rates of co-morbidities and public health systems that are fragile and at full capacity, even before the pandemic. Last year 83 people, mainly children, died in Samoa in a measles outbreak that originated in New Zealand.

According to a study published in the *Lancet* in July, COVID-19 has the potential to cause “substantial disruptions to health services,” due to cases overburdening the health systems and response measures limiting usual programs. Particularly in poor countries, disruptions to services for HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria could lead to substantial loss of life over the next five years, the report warned.

The regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, are showing cynical indifference to the social disaster unfolding in their former colonial possessions. The Australian government recently announced a paltry

\$US500,000 aid package for PNG to respond to COVID-19, following a donation of personal protective equipment for health workers.

New Zealand's Foreign Affairs Ministry declared in June that the Pacific will need “significant investment” to recover from the economic devastation of COVID-19, even if the virus itself is kept at bay. The ministry concluded, however, that its priority is to reinforce the Labour government's “Pacific reset” strategy—i.e. to upgrade NZ's diplomatic and military presence in lockstep with Washington's and Canberra's escalating confrontation with China.



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