

Hundreds of new COVID-19 cases raise fears of uncontrolled outbreaks across the Pacific

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A surge of COVID-19 cases in several Pacific states has sparked fears of uncontrolled outbreaks across the region. Hundreds of new cases have emerged in the past month, with many governments relaxing previous measures to control the virus, in order to “open up” their disintegrating economies.

The far-flung islands of the Pacific previously escaped high levels of COVID-19. However, the contributing factors—remoteness, small and scattered populations and the difficulties of travel and transport—have proved to be no defence against a rapidly worsening health and social crisis.

On July 15, French Polynesia re-opened to international visitors, in a desperate bid to resurrect its moribund tourism industry. The first COVID-19 outbreak between March and June, which affected 62 people, had been brought under control with a lockdown and border closures.

Now, with some 3,000 people landing in Tahiti each week, the number of cases has ballooned by 891 since early August to 953. They are mostly in urban areas, but also in Bora Bora, Raiatea, Huahine and Hao.

Flights from Los Angeles arrived after US tourists, among others, were cleared to enter without needing to quarantine. President Edouard Fritch acknowledged that the COVID-19 crisis had worsened in the US, and would do so in the French territory as well, but claimed that if French Polynesia failed to open up the consequences would be “catastrophic.”

Five Tahitian trade unions last week dropped empty threats of a general strike after the government remained adamant it would not reintroduce a two-week quarantine for arriving travellers.

A union spokesman said they were told that the authorities hoped there would be eventually “collective immunity,” i.e. the criminal policy of “herd immunity”

demanded internationally by business interests. School attendance remains compulsory, despite strike calls by teachers for tougher containment measures, and fruitless appeals by teacher unions.

The largest number of cases is in the US state of Hawai'i, with nearly 7,000 infections and 49 deaths. In late August, Governor David Ige imposed a 2-week lockdown for the island of Oahu to stem a spike in cases, which had risen to more than 200 a day. A similar order, declared in March, had previously pushed daily infection numbers down.

The US Surgeon General, Jerome Adams, who was in Hawai'i, described the move as only a “temporary reset” while contact tracing and isolation measures were enacted. Designated “essential businesses” have remained open, including child-care, construction, healthcare, grocery stores, gas stations, banks and financial institutions, and hardware stores. Public schools, and the University of Hawai'i still have in-person classes, but private schools have been able to conduct studies online.

In the Western Pacific, the US territory of Guam has close to 700 active cases, including 53 in hospital and 12 in intensive care, with 21 deaths. Scores of infections have been traced to US military personnel, as deployments to major bases have continued, with the Trump administration allowing the virus to run rampant in military facilities.

The aircraft carrier, USS Theodore Roosevelt, docked in Guam in March, in the midst of a mass outbreak of COVID-19 on board. Hundreds of sailors were quarantined in local hotels and crowded into the naval base gym. Some 1,156 infections among the crew were not counted in Guam's figures, but local officials have detailed nearly 200 military-linked cases on the island, including 35 personnel from the Andersen Air Force

base, who broke quarantine to visit local restaurants.

Guam's governor, Lou Leon Guerrero, has extended a public health emergency until the end of September, saying: "We are in very dire straits. We are in very desperate times. Our island right now is sick." The *Guardian* quoted Felix Cabrera, of the governor's physicians advisory group, who warned that with the fragile healthcare system stressed to the limit, the situation is "going to get worse before it gets better."

In Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Pacific's largest country, the number of confirmed infections has escalated from 11 in mid-July to 488, including five deaths. The cases, which first appeared among health workers at the Port Moresby General Hospital, have now spread from the capital to half the country's 22 provinces. With fewer than 16,000 tests conducted among the population of 9 million, the real infection rate is likely many times higher than the official figures.

A recent lockdown of Port Moresby was lifted after just a fortnight and domestic travel re-opened. Prime Minister James Marape declared PNG would not go back into lockdown, despite the escalating case numbers. "COVID-19 not only affects us health-wise but also economically," Marape said. "That is why we will not have another lockdown. We must adjust to living with the COVID-19... we will not shut down our country again," he insisted.

This deadly decision portends a social disaster in one of the world's most impoverished countries. The ramshackle health system is already being overwhelmed.

According to the Pacific Community development agency, only 55 percent of people in the Pacific have access to clean drinking water. World Vision's PNG director, Heather MacLeod, told the *Guardian* that without clean water people cannot protect themselves, and the likely result will be "a spread of the disease on a massive scale."

A compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis, available in epub and print formats.

The PNG government last month blocked the arrival of a flight carrying 180 workers from China, after Chinese mine operator Ramu NiCo., which runs the Ramu Nickel mine, revealed 48 employees were given a coronavirus vaccine in a possible unauthorized trial.

PNG's pandemic response controller, David Manning, banned the workers "in the best interests of our people." Demanding explanations from Beijing, Health Minister Jelta Wong said that if the shoe was on the other foot, China would be up in arms. "The relationship has been tested here," she warned.

The incident underscores the deepening geo-strategic tensions generated across the region as the COVID-19 crisis intensifies. At the forefront is Washington's stepped-up confrontation with, and preparations for war against China.

US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper made a flying visit to Hawai'i, Palau and Guam last month, condemning China's purported "malign activities" in the region, and seeking to buttress American influence. Esper had earlier promised Palau's president, Tommy Remengesau Jr, that the Trump administration would help secure COVID-19 vaccines for the country, when one became available.

Palau, with a population of 20,000, 1,500 kms east of the Philippines, is currently re-negotiating its so-called "compact of free association" with Washington. Remengesau has used assertions of growing Chinese influence to call for greater US involvement. Ahead of a meeting with Trump last year, he urged "a stronger US presence in the Pacific, we want to see that happen."

While Palau has welcomed Chinese tourists and investment, the former US trust territory remains firmly under the wing of Washington, which provides defence, funding, and access to social services. Palau is one of four remaining Pacific nations that recognise Taiwan, after Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched diplomatic recognition to Beijing last year.

Following Esper's August visit, Remengesau revealed that, in a hand-delivered letter, he told Esper he was eager to host land bases, port facilities and airfields for the US military, as well as a US Coast Guard presence.



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