

COVID-19 death toll continues climbing in the Pacific

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The Pacific territory of French Polynesia, including Tahiti, continues to see the number of people infected by COVID-19 escalate. As of December 10, confirmed cases had risen to 15,332. More than 5,000 new cases were recorded in the past month alone, with 210 in 24 hours to last Saturday.

Seven deaths in the last four days has brought the total number of fatalities since the pandemic began to 86. There are 62 people currently in hospital with 28 of them in intensive care. All but 62 cases occurred after borders were reopened in July and mandatory quarantine requirements abolished. The virus had been halted from late March with a lockdown and border closures.

On July 15, in a desperate bid to resurrect the moribund tourism industry and reignite the economy, President Edouard Fritch re-opened the territory to international visitors. Flights from Los Angeles recommenced with US residents and others able to enter without needing to quarantine. Over 28,000 tourists have entered since the border's reopening, 90 percent from the US and France. The French government briefly put restrictions on travellers from France last month, but flights are being resumed next week.

The virus has spread from the urban areas of Tahiti to the outer islands of Bora Bora, Raiatea, Huahine and Hao. Fritch initially acknowledged that the pandemic had worsened in the US, and would do so in the territory as well, but claimed that if French Polynesia failed to open up the economic consequences would be “catastrophic.” He falsely predicted that case numbers would plateau at about 200.

With the health situation out of control, Fritch has continued to insist it would have been “irresponsible” to keep the borders shut, claiming 20,000 workers

would have been condemned to unemployment. He absurdly told the assembly that from late May the territory was “COVID-19-prepared.”

The territory's administration is consciously pursuing the criminal policy of “herd immunity” demanded internationally by business interests. In late October a curfew was called over a weekend in Tahiti and Moorea, but then shortened for people to return to work. A previous curfew in May was lifted after judges described it as an attack on “individual liberty” and declared it illegal.

Noting that the infection rate was twice that of mainland France, a trade union leader, Patrick Galenon, last month called for a lockdown to be re-imposed. However, the unions dropped empty threats of a general strike in September after Fritch flatly refused to re-establish quarantine requirements for incoming travellers. School attendance has remained compulsory, despite calls by teachers for tougher containment measures, and fruitless appeals by teacher unions.

United States territories in the north and west Pacific have also seen a surge of COVID-19 cases. Guam, which is the site of a major American military base, has experienced a high rate of infections since August and is one of the worst hit parts of the US and the Pacific. Guam's total number of confirmed cases is around 7,000, with 113 deaths—significant for a population of only 165,000.

In November, over 1,700 people on Guam tested positive for the virus, almost 60 each day. So far this month, cases have reduced to less than half that number, prompting Governor Lou Leon Guerrero to declare the territory has started to “turn a corner.”

With the US federal administration in control of Guam's borders however, local officials have been limited in what they can do. According to the co-chair

for the Independent Guam organisation, Michael Luhan Bevacqua, Guam's dependent status has undermined its response to the pandemic in some key ways. Bevacqua told Radio NZ the US military had a habit of "doing its own thing," despite local guidelines.

In the Northern Marianas (CNMI), four arrivals this past week tested positive for COVID-19, taking the total number of cases to 113, including two deaths. Out of the 111 cases in the CNMI, 87 are from incoming passengers including 45 from the US mainland, 30 from Guam and 11 from other countries.

The CNMI has now gone 112 days without any community transmission. Health authorities are pinning their hopes on obtaining COVID-19 vaccines soon.

American Samoa is the only US Pacific jurisdiction that remains COVID free. The local governor recently denied entry to three US Air Force planes with 30 personnel on a mission to Antarctica. They were prevented from stopping overnight, and sent on to Auckland. Unlike many Pacific countries, including Samoa, repatriation flights for residents trapped overseas have not yet begun.

In Papua New Guinea (PNG), the region's largest and most populous country, an ongoing political crisis has been pitched into fresh confusion after three government MPs tested positive for COVID-19.

Responding to an application by the opposition, the Supreme Court has ordered parliament to sit next Monday, paving the way for a motion of no confidence against Prime Minister James Marape. Parliament's speaker, Job Pomat, had been advised by health officials that the parliament would only be safe to sit again if testing cleared a majority of MPs.

PNG's total number of cases is now 645, including seven known deaths. Of the country's 22 provinces, 16 have had confirmed cases of the virus. This includes 12 new cases from a significant cluster in West New Britain province with 42 infections. The country's testing regime remains woefully inadequate—only 30,000 people have been tested from the population of over eight million.

Fiji has 11 active cases of COVID-19. Two sailors who arrived on a freighter recently from Tonga have tested positive, joining two Fijians who travelled from New Zealand a week earlier and are now in border quarantine. Twenty-five locals including staff from the Biosecurity Authority, the Ports Authority and Customs

were all in quarantine.

Before the arrival of the pandemic, the region was already facing a health crisis with rampant diseases such as diabetes, a deadly measles outbreak, polio, malaria and tuberculosis. According to a UN report last week, over a dozen Pacific countries have seen an increase in HIV/AIDS. PNG, which has some of the world's worst health indicators, has an estimated 52,000 HIV cases while Fiji experienced 117 deaths from AIDS over the past year alone.

Pacific islands' public health systems are fragile and already at or near full capacity. They face being overwhelmed if COVID-19 cases become more widespread. A study published in the *Lancet* in September warned that efforts to combat endemic diseases could be derailed if COVID-19 measures are forced to be prioritised, thus dramatically increasing deaths across the region.

Meanwhile aid funding to health programs from the main local imperialist power, Australia, have been slashed in favour of infrastructure spending, in order to compete with growing Chinese investment. While Canberra's overall aid to the Pacific has increased over five years, it has reduced dedicated health funding to the Cook Islands by 75 percent, Fiji by 22 percent, the Solomon Islands by 13 percent and Samoa by 36 percent.



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