

Coronavirus crisis spirals out of control in Papua New Guinea

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Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Pacific's largest and most populous country, and one of the world's most impoverished, is experiencing an uncontrolled coronavirus outbreak after appearing to have avoided large numbers of infections during 2020. The source of the new wave has not been identified.

Hundreds of cases in the past few days have taken the national total to 2,226 and 26 reported deaths, with the capital Port Moresby the worst hit. This represents a sharp surge since the end of February when 1,316 COVID-19 and 13 COVID-19 deaths had been reported.

According to a social media post by a senior gynecologist at Port Moresby General Hospital, Glen Mola, patients are dying of COVID-19 "every day," suggesting the real death toll is far higher.

By world standards, the official figures are low, but fewer than 50,000 tests have been carried out among a population of nine million, the sixth-lowest testing rate in the world. In many places outside the capital there is no testing at all. The *Guardian* cited PNG government sources saying the real case rate could be 10 times the official figure.

The government is responsible for a growing disaster. Pandemic Controller and police commissioner David Manning announced Wednesday that a so-called "nationwide isolation strategy" will be put in place this week. He emphasized this would not be "a stiff lockdown," but simply measures "to ensure that people are not moving around unnecessarily."

After lifting a two-week lockdown of the capital Port Moresby during a surge of cases last July, Prime Minister James Marape declared: "COVID-19 not only affects us health-wise but also economically. We must adjust to living with the COVID-19... we will not shut down our country again."

All but three of PNG's 22 provinces have now recorded cases, with the National Capital District spiralling to over a thousand. The township of Lae was last week placed in lockdown, but only until this Friday, following a spike in numbers. New cases have hit Huon Gulf and Nawaeb Districts, the semi-autonomous island of Bougainville and Western Province, which borders the Indonesian territory of West Papua, where infection rates are among the highest in Melanesia.

The government last week announced it has sourced only 200,000 AstraZeneca vaccine doses from Australia and 70,000 from India, which Marape declared would "hopefully" arrive in April. The governor of East Sepik province, Allan Bird, said the delay would cost lives. "PNG did not order or pay for any vaccines in 2020, so we are not entitled to any vaccines" he said, adding that the only vaccines available to PNG "are donated by friendly governments."

In fact, Canberra's response to the unfolding crisis in its former colony is governed by intensifying geo-strategic considerations. The recent meeting of Quad leaders from the US, Australia, Japan and India committed to overseeing vaccination logistics for the Asia-Pacific region as part of their moves to strengthen military and strategic ties to confront China and prepare for war. Beijing last week deployed a medical team to Port Moresby.

On Monday, the *Australian* published a sharp warning from Australian Strategic Policy Institute director Peter Jennings that the emergency "could play into PNG politics and increase the risk of instability in the streets," thereby creating a health and security catastrophe on Australia's doorstep. Jennings said the federal government was reacting too slowly and called

for a deployment of Defence Force medics, a hospital ship and private medical contractors.

PNG's vulnerable healthcare system is on the verge of collapse. Port Moresby General Hospital, the country's biggest, is at capacity and staff are among a growing number of people ill with COVID-19. Entire sections of the hospital have been closed after 40 staff members tested positive. The hospital is running short of gloves and other personal protective equipment.

The hospital was forced to further restrict its services after 40 percent of mothers in the labour ward returned positive test results. They could not be separated from others because there is no isolation labour ward. Pandemic Controller Manning forecast "serious problems," including the possible closure of the hospital, which would lead to "chaos."

Provincial hospitals, including Angau Hospital in Lae, are already shutting with their resources severely strained following years of budget cuts. Mount Hagen Hospital has received only one-third of the money needed to remain open. The governor of Oro province, Gary Juffa, told the *Guardian* "years of neglect" and corruption inside PNG's healthcare system is "now uncovering a grim reality."

St John Ambulance commissioner Matt Cannon told the media that PNG faces an uncontrollable outbreak. "We are not at the tipping point now—the tipping point was three weeks ago," he said. "We are anticipating hundreds more cases, and potentially this will increase to thousands. We are at alert level. There are big alarms going off."

Cannon told *Al Jazeera* that the pandemic is being exacerbated by conspiracy theories that, along with a belief in sorcery and other superstitions, are a "fact of life in PNG." But according to Juffa, one reason for widespread misinformation is that politicians and "people in positions of responsibility... are going around saying the virus is not real, that vaccines are no good."

There are fears that ceremonies for PNG's recently deceased first prime minister, Michael Somare, who was buried on Tuesday, could become "super spreader" events. With many thousands having gathered in towns over recent days to mourn, the case numbers could climb dramatically in coming weeks.

Such a development will exacerbate the existing 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. A vast gulf separates the poverty-stricken PNG masses and the country's corrupt and venal political elite.

Explosive social struggles will undoubtedly erupt. Since 2016, doctors and nurses have repeatedly gone on strike over the grossly inadequate conditions in the health system. Following a sit-in early last year by 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.

In Australia, one of the biggest hospitals in Far North Queensland has declared an emergency following an influx of COVID-19 patients from PNG. Cairns Hospital is currently treating six patients from PNG, all fly-in fly-out mine workers. A significant number of the 51 cases in Queensland's hotel quarantine system are Australians returning from PNG.

PNG's worsening crisis could be repeated across the Pacific region, where new outbreaks are hitting island states previously relatively protected by their geographic isolation. New Caledonia went into a two-week lockdown from March 8 after nine community cases were confirmed. A day earlier neighbouring Wallis and Futuna reported the first of 19 community cases. Other countries such as the Solomon Islands also remain extremely vulnerable.



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