

Fiji government scrambles to contain COVID-19 outbreak

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The government of the Pacific island nation of Fiji this week imposed a three-day lockdown in response to a sudden outbreak of COVID-19 cases, linked to the B16-17 variant from India. The move was announced only 30 minutes before it was enforced.

While limited and inadequate, the measure was the strictest since COVID-19 hit the country in March last year. The main island of Viti Levu and other parts of the country went into lockdown, with people ordered indoors from May 1 to May 3. No businesses were allowed to operate for a 56-hour period and contact tracing was carried out around the capital Suva and neighbouring towns. Authorities banned inter-island travel and Fiji Airways suspended all international and domestic passenger flights.

The three-day lockdown came after the Health Ministry declared the total number of active cases had risen sharply with 29 transmitted locally. The numbers are continuing to escalate. As of May 6, Fiji has had 125 cases of COVID-19, 50 active cases, and three deaths since its first case in March last year. Testing, however, is low. Just 55,000 tests have been conducted nationwide since testing began in 2020.

Two doctors at Lautoka Hospital are among the newest cases. On Wednesday the hospital was cordoned off and closed after a 53-year-old surgical patient was found to be a “late stage” carrier of the virus and died. More than 400 patients, doctors, nurses, and other staff have been sequestered and effectively quarantined until it is determined who else may have had contact with the patient.

Health Secretary James Fong warned that events in India showed the threat posed by the strain could not be underestimated. “We cannot let that nightmare happen in Fiji,” he said in a televised address. “We still have time to stop it happening but a single misstep will bring

about the same COVID tsunami that our friends in India, Brazil, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States are enduring.”

The extremely infectious Indian strain has quickly spread. The cluster emerged after a soldier contracted the virus at a quarantine facility and transmitted it to his wife, who then exposed up to 500 people at a funeral. Fong said soldiers who had returned from overseas deployments had broken quarantine rules by mixing with each other when they should have been in isolation.

In another case, a returning Fiji citizen had tested negative but was recalled to quarantine following fears he may have contracted it from the soldiers. In the meantime, he had travelled extensively through Suva.

In an unrelated case, a 52-year-old woman from Nausori who tested positive may have exposed 887 garment factory workers to the virus. Contact tracing focussed on two factories, Lyndhurst where the woman worked, and the Mark One Apparel factory. Workers at the two facilities share the same company transportation.

In yet another case, specimens have been sent to Melbourne to determine the origin of a cluster in the Ra province, which has not been linked to the B16-17 cluster.

Authorities have warned that the country’s vaccination program will depend entirely on the availability of vaccines. Just 20,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine arrived in the country last week, for a population of 903,000. The initial rollout is targeting people with disabilities and co-morbidities such as diabetes, hypertension, heart conditions, asthma, HIV, cancer, as well as essential workers.

The emergence of the Indian variant in the southwest Pacific further demonstrates how vulnerable the world

remains to the pandemic, as new infectious strains ravage entire countries, and spread across even the most isolated and impoverished parts of the globe.

The Fiji outbreak follows that in nearby Papua New Guinea (PNG), where caseloads started surging exponentially two months ago. COVID-19 is now rife in the PNG capital, Port Moresby, and has spread to every province in the country. The health system has been close to complete breakdown since March. With over 11,000 cases and 115 deaths, the situation remains dire.

For most of the past year, the scattered Pacific island states had, to a greater or lesser extent, walled themselves off from the outside world. With strict border controls many, such as Samoa, the Cook Islands and others, remained either COVID-19 free or sustained relatively low numbers. Fiji was one of the more successful in initially containing community transmission.

A notable exception was the US territory of Guam, the site of a major American military base, which is one of the worst hit parts of the US and the Pacific. Guam's total confirmed cases is around 7,000, with 113 deaths, for a population of around 165,000. Also hard hit was French Polynesia. Since the resumption of quarantine-free travel to Tahiti last July in a bid to open the beleaguered tourism industry, 18,000 people have caught the virus and 141 died.

The latest outbreaks highlight the dangers of resuming international travel. Australia and New Zealand have established a "travel bubble" to allow quarantine free travel between the two countries, even as recent cases in Brisbane and Perth prompted temporary shutdowns of both cities. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has announced a similar quarantine free travel arrangement with the Cook Islands beginning on May 17.

The Fiji government of Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama has been agitating since last year for Pacific tourism to be reopened. In 2020 more than 70 yachts used a special provision allowing "VIP tourists" to enter Fiji as part of plans to kick start tourism.

Tourism contributes nearly 40 percent of Fiji's gross domestic product—about \$FJ2 billion (\$US980 million)—and directly or indirectly employs over 150,000 people. In 2019, Fiji had more tourists coming into the country (894,000) than residents (roughly

880,000). The bulk were from Australia and New Zealand which like many countries have now banned international travel. Tens of thousands of workers in the industry lost their jobs last year.

In March, the Bainimarama government said it had proven Fiji was a safe destination for travellers, with no community cases for more than 320 days. Fiji urged Australia and New Zealand to join its so-called "Bula Bubble" scheme. The New Zealand Fiji Business Council also declared a quarantine-free travel bubble between the countries was "long overdue." All arrivals into Fiji have now been banned since April 22.



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