

Fiji losing control of escalating COVID-19 outbreak

John Braddock**10 June 2021**

In a display of incompetence and indifference, Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama has rejected calls to declare a nationwide state of emergency as the Pacific island nation struggles with a rapidly escalating COVID-19 outbreak.

While Suva's Colonial War Memorial Hospital is now sealed off after becoming the centre of a major cluster, Bainimarama last week told parliament there was "no need" for a state of emergency. He said it was up to the ministry of health to decide whether it was necessary to "take that option," and it had not done so.

New Zealand epidemiologist Michael Baker warned on Wednesday that with Fiji battling the infectious Delta variant from India, it could well "follow the path of countries that have lost control of the pandemic, with large numbers of cases and unfortunately large numbers of deaths as well." In order to eliminate the virus, he said, a total and intensive lockdown is needed.

Authorities are losing their grip as the outbreak rapidly escalates. TVNZ Pacific correspondent Barbara Dreaver reported: "We don't know what Fiji's strategy is because we are not hearing from the leaders." Bainimarama had not fronted the media for some time and there was "a lot of confusion on the ground," she said.

Fiji's Secretary of Health James Fong declared that the government would "fight this virus in a targeted way." Echoing governments around the world that are prioritising business demands above public health, Fong said the current policy "allows Fijians to access essential services and allows the economy to function as normally and safely as possible."

The government's Incident Management Team has itself become a fast-growing cluster with 35 cases in the Ministry of Health. Fong, along with the head of health protection Aalisha Sahu Khan and chief medical

advisor Jemesa Tudravu have been forced into isolation. On Tuesday, the parliamentary complex in Suva was shut down over fears for staff members.

As of Thursday, there have been 880 cases recorded since the pandemic began, with 234 recoveries and four deaths. For the entire year to March, there had been only 70 cases.

The origin of many cases remains unknown. Over the past week there have been record numbers of daily infections reported. On Monday night, health authorities logged 64 cases and highlighted one death. On Wednesday, another 94 new infections in 24 hours were confirmed. Of these, 28 were from the main hospital. People recently discharged had turned up as positive cases in other districts.

According to Fong, the escalation in daily case numbers, especially from the Central Division around Suva, signals "the increasing severity of this outbreak," which has "an impact on our ability to respond." More cases are expected.

On May 30, Suva, Nausori and Lami were placed in what is called the Lami-Nausori containment zone, which is under a 6 p.m. to 4 a.m. curfew with several villages locked down. Fong declared that with the escalating numbers, combined with the paucity of resources, authorities would shift into a "mitigation phase" to prioritise only those patients with "severe illness."

There are currently 604 cases in managed isolation, which is now at capacity. The government has set up a field hospital in Suva, which has become the de facto emergency department and triage centre for the city of 300,000.

Outside the capital, 44 isolation communities have been established across the country. Food shortages are being reported, with vulnerable families living on a tin

of fish or a packet of biscuits a day. In squatter settlements in the Nasinu district outside Suva many people already live hand-to-mouth. Usaia Moli from the Council of Social Services told Radio NZ thousands of people were not being reached and were “suffering in silence.”

The defence force has come under scrutiny after soldiers returning from overseas in April reportedly broke quarantine rules. The first cluster appeared after a soldier contracted the virus at a quarantine facility and transmitted it to his wife, who exposed up to 500 people at a funeral. A cluster of over 30 cases erupted when a naval officer contracted the virus at a funeral and spread it to his crew members.

Fiji can now test almost 2,000 people a day with the recent supply of four new machines by the World Health Organisation. Overall testing, however, remains low. Since testing began in 2020, 129,200 tests have been conducted among the population of 903,000.

So far 228,030 people have received at least one dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine, but supplies remain inadequate. This week, Australia is sending an additional 50,000 vaccine doses, and another 500,000 doses will reportedly arrive from New Zealand but not until July—all of which falls well short of what is required.

The response of the regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, has been paltry. New Zealand Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta said her officials were in contact with counterparts in Fiji and were “responding to their needs as they arise.” She then added: “However, Fiji is tasked with responding to an issue which we’ve all had to, and we’ve given our commitment in terms of PPE gear support and also some financing.”

The outbreak is certain to exacerbate the impoverished country’s social, economic and political crises. Tens of thousands of workers in the moribund tourism industry have already lost their jobs. Tourism normally contributes nearly 40 percent of Fiji’s GDP—about \$FJ2 billion (\$US980 million)—and employs over 150,000 people either directly or indirectly.

While Fiji was initially one of the more successful Pacific countries in containing an influx of COVID-19, its economy went into sharp decline. The government responded by looting \$US454 million from workers’

pension savings in the National Provident Fund to provide relief to businesses.

The Minister for Economy Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum last month announced a \$US930 million stimulus package, with \$US690 million sourced offshore. Total debt will increase to \$US4.1 billion by this July with gross borrowing for the 2020/2021 financial year at \$US1.4 billion.

Across the region, the pandemic is heightening social tensions and political instability. Samoa remains in the grip of a constitutional crisis following April’s election which saw the defeat of the ruling Human Rights Protection Party that had been in power since 1982. Amid an escalating health disaster in Papua New Guinea, Prime Minister James Marape has adjourned parliament to avoid a no-confidence vote and his likely removal from office.

Bainimarama, who has ruled Fiji with an iron fist since seizing power in a military coup in 2006, will, sooner rather than later, confront the eruption of mass opposition from the working class and rural poor.



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