Fiji regime resists lockdown despite escalating COVID-19 crisis

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18 June 2021

The COVID-19 outbreak in Fiji is rapidly escalating, with record case numbers being confirmed virtually every 24 hours.

Following 116 new infections on Tuesday, Wednesday saw 121 cases with health officials identifying two new clusters. On Thursday, 91 new cases and one death were reported in just 14 hours, followed by 115 on Friday and another death at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital (CWMH).

New Zealand epidemiologist Michael Baker told Radio NZ on June 16 that the situation in Fiji is "extremely worrying" and an urgent national lockdown needs to be "seriously considered." It would be "devastating" if the virus were to spread from the main island of Viti Levu where it is currently centred, he warned, due to the paucity of healthcare. Baker called on the government to act "very decisively now" to return to an "elimination position."

In just eight weeks 1,578 cases of the Delta variant have been identified. In the year between March 2020 and 2021, there had been just 70 infections recorded. There are now 1,182 active cases in isolation, 452 recoveries and 6 deaths.

Testing, however, remains inadequate, with 117,221 samples tested since the outbreak started and 160,082 since testing began in early 2020. Only 2.1 percent of the population is fully vaccinated, while 43 percent of those aged 18 and older have received their first dose. The country's total population is 890,000.

On Wednesday, Health Secretary James Fong told the media that most of the current cases are linked to existing clusters, "but there is a need to review other cases where the source is unknown."

Thursday's count included significant increases at the main clusters: 17 cases from the CWMH, 13 from Navosai, five from the government's Rewa Emergency Operations Centre, two from the Nasinu Police Barracks, four from Korovou in the Tailevu Province, four from Tramline in Nawaka, Nadi and one from the Townhouse Hotel.

The cluster at the Town House Hotel in Suva is where infected CWMH and Incident Management Team staff are being accommodated.

Outside the capital Suva and the area around it there is a new, fast-growing cluster in the regional centre of Nadi, where 35 infections were identified this week. Six infants who tested positive to COVID-19 are meanwhile in a stable condition at Lautoka Hospital in the west of the main island. Fong told the *Fiji Times* they were from a community in lockdown in Nadi.

While 10 people have died after testing positive for COVID-19, only 6 have had their deaths attributed to the coronavirus. The Health Ministry says seven other patients died from existing chronic conditions they had when admitted to hospital in Suva. This has raised concerns among Fijians who are calling for an explanation over what constitutes a COVID-19 death.

As the crisis has intensified, the government, led by former military coup leader Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, is resisting calls for a 28-day lockdown, saying it would "destroy" the economy. Bainimarama flatly declared this week that shutting down completely would be "too drastic" and lead to higher unemployment.

Echoing governments around the world that are prioritising business demands above public health, Fong earlier declared that the government would "fight this virus in a targeted way." The policy, he falsely stated, "allows Fijians to access essential services and allows the economy to function as normally and safely as possible."

In a tacit admission that the situation is out of control,

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Fong said this week that he is looking at getting assistance "from our partners in Australia to come and help us develop some of the contingency plans that are required in case we persistently get up to 200 [daily cases]. So I am already planning up to that phase in case we get up to 200."

The deepening crisis is opening up divisions within the ruling establishment. Leader of the opposition National Federation Party called the government's strategy a "disaster." He said Bainimarama "has failed miserably to have a comprehensive health and economic plan," and the longer a lockdown was delayed, "the greater the economic pain will be."

The outbreak is meanwhile exacerbating the impoverished country's social crisis. Fiji's unemployment rate, which hovered around 6 percent before the pandemic, is estimated to have increased to about 35 percent. Thousands have lost their jobs, particularly in the moribund tourism industry, while thousands more have had massive pay cuts or seen work hours reduced. A general food crisis is hitting the working class and rural poor.

Save the Children Fiji head Shairana Ali said: "Many families have told us they are exhausted… Whatever little savings they had are gone" and they are turning to charities. Many parents are going hungry to stretch out the little food they have to be able to feed their children.

The charity's New Zealand arm has launched an emergency appeal to provide grocery parcels. Spokesperson Heidi Coetzee said more than 1,000 requests for assistance had already been received. The aid is aimed at helping single parents, families with young children and grandparents looking after their grandchildren. Coetzee said Fiji, still recovering from last year's major tropical cyclones, has been hit on a "second front" with the pandemic.

The response of the region's local imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand to the growing crisis remains paltry and self-serving. In addition to limited supplies of PPE and vaccines, Canberra and Wellington will provide a meagre $A67 million to support Fiji's 2021–22 budget.

New Zealand's Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta hypocritically declared that New Zealand wouldn't tell other countries, including Fiji, how they should respond to COVID-19. She said New Zealand's role is to "assist" and "not infringe on any sovereign rights." In fact, both Australia and New Zealand have long histories of carrying out military and regime change operations across the Pacific to advance their own interests.

A major aim of both imperialist countries is deterring China's diplomatic and economic influence in Fiji and other countries in the region, as Australia and NZ are integrated into US military preparations against China.

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