

Fiji overwhelmed by spiralling COVID-19 outbreak

John Braddock
29 June 2021

The Pacific island nation of Fiji has, for the second week in a row, recorded spiralling daily cases of COVID-19 as the outbreak that began in April continues to spread unabated. Infection and death rates have been rising rapidly since the first registered daily total of 100 on June 13.

Fiji recorded 312 new COVID-19 cases and four deaths in 24-hours to Tuesday, June 29. This followed 241 cases and two deaths reported Monday, 266 cases and one death on Saturday, 215 cases and three deaths Friday, a previous record of 308 cases and one death Thursday and another 279 cases and four deaths last Wednesday.

Fiji's count in the current outbreak stands at 3,306 active cases in just eight weeks. A total of 4,074 cases have been recorded since March 2020, with just over 800 people recovered.

The death count is shrouded in confusion. While the official toll stands at 21 deaths, New Zealand correspondent Barbara Dreaver told Radio NZ at least nine more people had actually died but authorities were not counting them, claiming they died from other conditions.

Dreaver added, "Officials are saying it's going to get worse, and the reason that they know that is because people who are turning up positive come from really crowded settlements. And so there is this huge fear, and rightly so, that there's just so many more people who are infected."

The *Fiji Times* speculated on June 24 that the looming COVID-19 disaster could be the largest public health crisis in the Pacific since a New Zealand ship introduced influenza into Samoa in 1918, resulting in 9,000 deaths, or six percent of the population.

Fiji's Medical Services' Head of Health Protection, Aalisha Sahukhan, expressed alarm that government

leaders knew what was coming but warnings were not listened to. "What we are most concerned about is the next wave, the wave of people with severe illness requiring hospitalisation and the deaths that will come with it," she said.

Fiji's test positivity ratio is running at 7.4 percent. This figure, which is also rising every day, measures the number of positive results for every 100 tests and gives an indication of community spread. According to the World Health Organisation, a threshold of 5 percent indicates widespread community transmission. Some medical authorities are warning of 600 deaths and over 50,000 active cases by early August.

The country's vaccination program is insufficient to contain the outbreak. On Friday one centre had less than 200 vaccine shots to administer. While 28.8 percent of the population has received their first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine but only about 2 percent are fully vaccinated.

New Zealand epidemiologist Michael Baker has made repeated warnings about the "grim" situation in Fiji and advised a full lockdown. "If you don't do this you are left with basic measures focusing on cases of testing, contact tracing. That capacity looks like it's completely overwhelmed already in Fiji so that really isn't effective anymore, so you are really running out of choices at the moment," Baker said.

Despite the increasingly disastrous surge, Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama continues to resist calls for the government to impose a full lockdown of either the main island Viti Levu, where the outbreak is centred, or across the entire country. Bainimarama said a complete shutdown would "cripple the economy."

Radio NZ reported last Friday that Bainimarama appears to be "missing in action," and is leaving Health Secretary James Fong to front the crisis. Bainimarama

has only given one public address since April. He used that speech, given nearly two weeks ago, to reiterate that going into a full lockdown would be “too drastic” and lead to higher unemployment.

Targeted containment areas have been put in place in lieu of strict lockdown measures, with curfews for a limited number of areas on Viti Levu. The government has restricted movement to essential purposes only—to obtain food and medicine, and for authorised work.

However, the list of workplaces that can operate increases. Minister for Employment Parveen Bala has said being vaccinated will become mandatory for those wanting to travel between regions, including for work. Bala said once the country’s population of 889,953 had been vaccinated, steps such as containment areas and potential lockdowns would “not be needed.”

Fong’s statements are a dangerous mix of complacency, wilful denial and finger-pointing. Last Thursday he told the media: “If I believed there was a medical case to be made for a 24-hour curfew for 28 days for all of Viti Levu, I’d advise the prime minister directly. I have not done that because, medically, we do not believe a 24-hour curfew for 28 straight days would work.”

Fong blamed ordinary people for the situation, declaring that “compliance, not lockdowns” was the way out of the alarming outbreak. He claimed that given the “track record” of poor public compliance there was no guarantee there would be compliance with further restrictions and the government “simply does not have the capacity to enforce such a strict lockdown” everywhere.

The UN resident coordinator for Fiji and the Pacific, Sanaka Samarasingha, repeated the same line, telling the pro-government *Fiji Sun* “not enough Fijians are taking the risks of Covid-19 seriously enough.”

The government, which came to power in a coup led by Bainimarama in 2006, is a brutal authoritarian regime with a long history of suppressing the working class and rural poor. It is pursuing the same strategy as governments elsewhere of “herd immunity,” i.e. letting the disease run rampant on the basis that ordinary people have to learn to “live with” it.

Fong has declared that the government’s strategy has moved from “containment” to “mitigation,” particularly in hard-hit areas. He falsely claimed the “global expert consensus” was that COVID-19 is likely

to become an endemic disease, which continues to circulate indefinitely internationally. Fong said it was “too early” to say if that would be the case in Fiji, but regardless, the government’s strategy would “remain the same.”

The response of the local imperialist powers to the crisis erupting in their own backyard remains extremely limited. Last week, the New Zealand government announced an extra \$NZ10 million to help with Fiji’s response to the pandemic. Small teams of medical specialists from New Zealand and Australia have also been sent to assist, a totally inadequate contribution to the impoverished country facing the collapse of its health infrastructure.



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