

Fiji faces unprecedented COVID-19 disaster

John Braddock**11 July 2021**

Under the impact of the virulent Delta COVID-19 variant, Fiji is heading towards a health and social disaster on an unprecedented scale.

A new record of 636 cases and six deaths was reported on Tuesday July 6. The next day, 791 infections and three deaths were confirmed, followed Friday by 860 cases and three more deaths. Over the weekend 991 new cases and four deaths were reported across 48 hours.

Among the population of 900,000, there have been 10,512 cases since March 2020. Fiji now has 8,576 active cases in isolation and 55 people have died, all but two of them from the latest outbreak, which began in April. One of the deceased is a 15-year-old.

The seven-day average of new daily cases has increased to 627, with a positivity rate of 16.8 percent and trending upwards. A week ago, Secretary of Health James Fong predicted case numbers could reach 800 a day.

According to New Zealand Canterbury University statistician, Michael Plank, based on official figures, Fiji's numbers are higher per capita than those in India, at the peak of its outbreak. According to Plank, an outbreak on a similar scale in New Zealand would mean more than 2,500 cases per day.

In the year to March 2021, the Pacific island state managed to largely shut out the virus, recording just 70 cases. The government used the relatively low number to declare Fiji "safe" for opening up the tourism industry. The Delta variant subsequently entered the country through a quarantine breach.

With the ICU full at the capital Suva's main hospital, the health system is under severe stress and struggling to deal with the escalating number of serious cases. People going into the Suva field hospital are unable to access a ventilator. Fong has declared that officials expect to see "more people dying at home." The morgue, which can take 60 bodies, is at full capacity,

and families are being urged to collect their loved ones for burial.

With hospitals unable to cope, authorities have sent more than 1,000 COVID-19 infected people back home to self-isolate. Many are going into multi-generational, crowded households.

TVNZ Pacific correspondent Barbara Dreaver reported on one family with two members who had contracted COVID and was told to isolate at home. Desperate, with no food, a contact within the household had gone out to buy some. This is now a common occurrence. Dreaver said many people were "very angry," while others were "extremely scared."

In the face of the deteriorating situation, Prime Minister and former military coup leader, Frank Bainimarama, has not resiled from his criminal stance of opposing a full lockdown. In the name of saving the economy, the regime is allowing a range of businesses to remain operational. Retail businesses, restaurants and gyms are all open, on the spurious grounds that minimal safety measures are being followed. People are being told to socially distance and wear masks.

Radio NZ's correspondent in Suva, Lice Movono, said: "There are a lot of fearful people, so much anxiety and continuing distrust of the government, but the government is not coming out to explain itself very well, and we haven't seen our ministers, our Prime Minister, for a very long time now."

In a sign of growing alarm within Fiji's ruling elite, deputy opposition leader, Biman Prasad, from the National Federation Party, told Radio NZ that the government's strategy had been an "utter failure," and called for a lockdown. He pleaded with the government to listen to health experts and not to rely only on vaccinations.

Officials claim that they now have enough AstraZeneca vaccine supplies from Australia, India and New Zealand to vaccinate the entire population. So far,

however, only 59.6 percent of the population has received one jab and 11.2 percent have been fully vaccinated.

Neil Sharma, Fiji's Health Minister from 2009-2014, told Radio NZ the nation was "crippled," the crisis is "mind boggling" and a "sickening environment to be in." Pointing to a looming social disaster, Sharma noted that about 20 percent of Suva's population lives in poor, crowded conditions. "You have six, seven people living in one room. A lean-to shed. So how you separate, how you socially distance, is a problem."

Up to 30,000 people have applied to volunteer relief agencies for help. They are among the poorest, with no savings, surviving for more than two months with no income and no national social protection and struggling to put food on the table. The *Fiji Times*cited psychotherapist Selina Kuruleca pleading with the government to "listen to people" because "[w]e have a mental health epidemic on our hands."

On Wednesday, the Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS) called on the government to activate the Disaster Management Committee to address the crisis before "systems collapse." Chief executive Vani Catanasiga said the health services and front-liners were overwhelmed, "and may not be able to cope much longer."

FCOSS emphasised that the situation was no longer just a health crisis, but a "humanitarian crisis with far-reaching and long-term impacts on the well-being of Fijian citizens." There have been two protests from communities in local lockdowns in recent weeks, over access to food. FCOSS, however, has confined itself to a demand that value added tax (VAT) be removed from food, a measure that will do nothing to alleviate widespread food insecurity and hunger.

Facing the prospect of a complete social breakdown and rising popular anger, the government is adopting more authoritarian methods. While absolving the government of any culpability, authorities are blaming ordinary people for failing to comply with warnings, while stepping up enforcement measures.

Last week, 48 people were arrested for failing to wear a mask in public, while more than 1,000 have been arrested for breaching curfews. Along with clamping down on social gatherings, police have been ordered to enforce mask wearing, and ensure that business operators comply with COVID-19 restrictions. Spot

fines, ranging from \$20 to \$4,000, for breaching any of more than 20 offences outlined in public health regulations, are being imposed.

In his first public statement in more than six weeks, on Thursday Bainimarama appeared on television to threaten unvaccinated workers with the sack. Public servants who have not received their first vaccine dose were ordered to take leave and not return to work until they have had one dose by August 15 and been fully vaccinated by November. Private sector employers and workers face a similar directive, with the possibility of non-compliant businesses being shut down. "No jabs, no job," Bainimarama bluntly declared.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact