COVID-19 daily case numbers exceed 1,000 in Fiji

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The Fiji government reported a daily record 1,285 cases of COVID-19 in the 24 hours to 8 a.m. Monday. That compares to 626 cases and nine deaths in the previous 24-hour period. The seven-day average of new cases has risen to 1,046 per day.

Fifteen deaths, including that of a 102-year-old woman, and 918 cases were reported on Thursday. That followed 1,091 infections and 21 deaths on Wednesday, the sixth of seven days that had topped 1,000 cases, including 1,054 cases and 12 deaths last Tuesday.

Fiji has over 18,000 active cases in isolation, with 195 deaths, all but two of them from the outbreak that started in April, and all but three unvaccinated. There have been 24,354 cases recorded during the current outbreak and 24,424 total cases since March 2020. In the whole of last year, just 70 cases had been recorded.

Health Secretary James Fong said that while the recent surge was contained to the main island, Viti Levu, primarily in the Lami-Suva-Nausori corridor, the Health Ministry had seen increasing cases in the Western Division over the past week. Tens of thousands of people who live in crowded conditions in "informal" settlements, in the affected areas, are particularly vulnerable.

The latest victims include a pregnant health worker and two other pregnant women. The health worker from Suva presented to a medical facility on July 16 with shortness of breath and chest pain. Her baby was delivered by emergency caesarean section two days later, but her condition worsened and she died five days after admission.

The other two pregnant victims had been unwell with COVID-19 symptoms at home, before going to health facilities in severe respiratory distress. Physicians made the decision to conduct emergency caesarean operations, saving both babies. Fong noted that the maternal deaths were a "clear indication of the severity of this outbreak."

Fiji's national seven-day average daily test positivity has hit 22.8 percent and continues on an upward trend. Just three weeks ago it was 7.4 percent. The World Health Organisation's benchmark rate, which indicates widespread and uncontrolled community transmission, is 5 percent. A rising positivity rate signals that the virus is spreading faster than the growth seen in confirmed cases.

The latest surge in cases has seen the government issue Viti Levu residents with new curfew hours, from 6:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m. However, Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama continues to oppose a full lockdown, declaring such a move would "cripple" the economy and impact jobs. With no change to its pro-business strategy, the government is pursuing a mandatory vaccination campaign. Workers have been told they must be fully vaccinated by November or face losing their jobs. Only those who are vaccinated can obtain the paltry government income support.

While 441,171 people, or 75.2 percent of the target population, have received their first dose of vaccine, only 97,268, or 16.6 percent, have received both doses.

Auckland University modelling expert, Shaun Hendy, told Radio NZ that a full lockdown would be the "logical" way to address the crisis. He said whether Fiji had a lockdown or not, New Zealand should be moving faster to get supplies of vaccine to Suva, and offering financial assistance to support the economy. A supply of 500,000 doses of the AstraZeneca and Modena vaccines is due to be sent from NZ, but not until next month.

Head of the Pasifika Medical Association (NZ) Debbie Sorensen appealed for more international medical staff, as her Fijian colleagues were "exhausted

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and overworked." Only about 20 medical specialists, from Australia and New Zealand, are currently in Fiji.

Describing the situation as "grim," Christchurch anaesthetist Wayne Morriss said doctors and nurses in Fiji were working incredibly hard, often seven days a week. The main hospital was effectively closed a month ago to patients other than COVID cases. With ongoing health needs during the pandemic, "there's still lots of patients with medical or surgical problems that need treatment," he said.

More than 4,000 COVID-positive people have been turned away from hospitals because there are not enough beds. They are being forced to try to recover at home. There are also 87 crew members and passengers who have been placed into isolation on four inter-island ships.

TVNZ Pacific correspondent Barbara Dreaver reported on July 23 that a leaked document from Fiji's Ministry of Health showed that health workers who have tested COVID-19 positive, but have exhibited no symptoms, are being ordered to keep working. NZ epidemiologist Michael Baker said he was extremely worried as it was still possible to catch the virus from someone who is asymptomatic. "There are many vulnerable people in Fiji's health system," he noted.

Cellphone footage from Suva's Colonial War Memorial Hospital, released to TVNZ, has highlighted the dire situation. Distressing scenes show patients sharing wards with dead bodies that have been left for hours; people in and around the COVID Care tents unmasked; and only one filthy toilet for all patients. "Even the dead wouldn't want to go in there," the woman who did the filming declared.

With the highest official daily infection rate per capita in the world, the Fiji government is no longer testing for COVID-19. "One way of getting rid of that statistic is to stop testing. What we are seeing is a disintegrating health system, a health system in crisis, and a tragedy unfolding for the people of Fiji," Dreaver observed.

The escalating economic, social and health crisis is producing sharp political ruptures within the ruling elite. At least seven opposition politicians were arrested last Sunday, following their criticism of the government's proposed amendment to the iTaukei Land Trust Act 1940, which covers the use of iTaukei (indigenous Fijian) land holdings. The parliament is due to sit this week to debate the land legislation, as well as the 2021/2022 budget.

The annual budget, worth $US1.78 billion, relies on loans to make up almost 45 percent of the funds to run the country into 2022. National Federation Party leader Biman Prasad said the budget was designed to quell increasing anti-government sentiment. He called it a "bogus budget" that was overly optimistic and avoided acknowledging the reality of the COVID crisis, which would require "deep cuts" to government spending.

The fresh arrests highlight the increasingly authoritarian methods of the government, which still rests on the military, following the 2006 coup, led by Bainimarama. The opposition politicians taken into custody include those who have lately criticised the government's failed handling of the COVID-19 crisis.

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