

Hundreds of new COVID-19 cases in Fiji amid third Delta wave

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3 January 2022

Fiji last week reported over a thousand new cases of COVID-19 in the community and one death, amid the third wave of a Delta outbreak and the likely spread of the Omicron variant.

The Health Ministry confirmed 20 cases on Christmas Day, 109 on Boxing Day, 79 the following Monday and 815 on New Year's Day. Fiji has recorded a total of 54,147 cases, most of them since the second wave began in April. After peaking in August, case numbers dropped away through September. The latest surge, which began last month, has produced 1,524 cases between 20 December and January 2.

The new wave coincides with the reckless decision by the Bainimarama government to open the country's borders to international travel from December 1. The move is in line with the clamour from big business and political elites internationally for the global population to "live with the virus," a homicidal policy that threatens millions more deaths. In the Pacific this agenda is being propelled by demands to restore the devastated tourism industry, deemed essential to the economies of island businesses.

Tourism Fiji last month confirmed 75,000 bookings for hotels and resorts until the end of January. Spokesman Brent Hill told Radio NZ that at the current rate of bookings tourism is "well on its way to becoming a billion-dollar industry again." Fiji Airways has taken more than 200,000 bookings into 2022.

Tourism Fiji also recently launched the Open for Happiness advertising blitz with a website that has been viewed more than five million times. Hill said the campaign is aimed at a "largely white, largely affluent, largely burnt out kind of audience," addressing the question; "in a post-COVID world, where actually are we going to find happiness? What is actually really making us happy?"

None of the dangers to the local population, let alone visitors, figure in any of the hype. Most of the anticipated tourists to Fiji are from Australia, New Zealand and the US, all countries experiencing uncontrolled outbreaks of both the Delta and Omicron variants.

Fiji recorded 30,000 visitor arrivals during December, of which some 300 have reportedly come with COVID-19, which was only subsequently discovered. Hill downplayed the dangers, saying all were vaccinated and none needed hospitalisation. They were isolating within segmented parts of their hotels.

With the highly transmissible variants having the potential to explode from a single case, this is a recipe for disaster. Radio NZ reported on December 27 that the InterContinental Fiji Golf Resort & Spa in Nadi had advised its guests that "there are currently several guests at the resort who have returned positive COVID-19 tests," warning people to "remain cautious" while following health guidelines.

The eruption of cases within Fiji and its main tourism markets has not prompted any shutdown of borders. Instead, the Health Ministry made minor changes to its travel protocols. Travellers must now produce a negative PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test, taken no more than two calendar days before the scheduled day of departure. Prior to this, they had to return a negative PCR test 72 hours before leaving for Fiji.

Visitors are required to spend three days at a Care Fiji Commitment hotel or resort, undergoing a test on day two of their stay. If they return a negative result, they are released on day three. The wearing of face masks in enclosed spaces is mandatory as well as at outdoor locations where groups of people gather.

The move to open the border follows longstanding refusals by Bainimarama to impose a full national

lockdown, on the grounds that it would “destroy” the economy. When the reopening plan was announced in September it was criticised by sections of the establishment worried that it could trigger social opposition and political instability. Bill Gavoka, leader of the main opposition Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), warned that the government should focus on “health first over the economy, which will fall into line.”

The death toll has meanwhile risen to 700, all but four since April. Health Secretary James Fong said there were another 619 COVID-19 positive patients who died from medical conditions they had before contracting the virus and were thus not included in the COVID figures. The latest death was a 62-year-old COVID patient who died at home on Christmas Day. He was fully vaccinated and had suffered severe respiratory distress.

The national 7-day rolling average of cases has escalated from 10 daily cases before Christmas to 190 on January 1. Fong said he could not confirm how many were of the Omicron variant but authorities were “working on the assumption that the Omicron variant is already here, and is being transmitted within the community.”

Genomic sequencing results of positive samples sent overseas are still to confirm if this is the case. Fong declared, “we should expect a large number of cases, and we will also expect that infections will occur in vaccinated persons and those who have previously been infected with the Delta variant.”

Repeating the mantra of governments internationally, Fong emphasised the government’s reliance on vaccines alone, saying “people who are vaccinated or had booster doses are far less likely to become sick enough to require hospitalisation.” As of 29 December, 92.1 percent of Fiji’s adult population were fully vaccinated. There are also 39,954 children aged 12–17 vaccinated, while 58,283 teenagers are yet to be given their second injection.

More cases are expected in the outlying islands given the opening of maritime travel and the many social media postings of crowding on vessels and at social gatherings. These islands and the Northern Division were largely spared the Delta outbreak that affected the main island of Viti Levu earlier this year.

Other Pacific nations are pursuing a similar strategy.

Quarantine and isolation-free travel between New Zealand and the Cook Islands is set to resume on January 14, despite the recent arrival of the Omicron variant into New Zealand. The dates for the reopening were initially announced in November but pushed back after the Cook Islands recorded its first case of COVID-19.

Australia and New Zealand are at the forefront of the reopening push, despite temporary disruptions to their schedules. Australia’s Morrison government reopened borders in December to vaccinated skilled migrants and foreign students, after a two-year ban. The eruption of the virulent Omicron variant only forced a brief two-week delay to allow health officials to get more “information” about the strain.

The New Zealand Labour-led government has postponed its phased border reopening plans from the middle of this month until the end of February, citing the rapid global spread of the Omicron variant. Plans to allow quarantine free entry to almost all foreign tourists from April have not, so far, been affected.



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