

Solomon Islands' government imposes snap lockdown after COVID outbreak

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The Solomon Islands' capital, Honiara, was placed in lockdown from yesterday evening after health authorities detected a COVID-19 cluster.

The outbreak marks the first time there has been community transmission of the coronavirus since the beginning of the global pandemic. Due to a combination of the Pacific country's geographical isolation, low population (around 700,000) and strict border controls, at the beginning of this month there had only been 24 total confirmed cases. These were all detected in incoming travellers, and quarantine measures prevented any wider spread.

The current outbreak involves six confirmed positive cases, but there are widespread fears of as yet undetected transmission within Honiara's impoverished areas known as informal settlements, effectively slums. It remains unknown what variant of COVID-19 people have contracted.

The index case has been traced to January 9, when a Papua New Guinean medical doctor who had COVID travelled by boat with nine of his family members from the Nukumanu Islands (also known as the Tasman Islands) to Solomon Islands' Ontong Java Atoll, reportedly to attend a wedding.

The Nukumanu Islands and Ontong Java Atoll are separated by a small body of water that the Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Solomon Islands border traverses. The peoples of the neighbouring islands have longstanding historical and cultural ties and are of Polynesian origin (as distinct from the Melanesian majority in both PNG and the Solomons).

Last Tuesday, authorities announced that five Solomon Islanders living on the Atoll had tested positive. The government immediately placed the small island community in lockdown and barred all travel in and out of the area.

However, a small passenger vessel, the MV Akwa, had already transported a group of people from Ontong Java Atoll to Honiara, arriving January 10. One of the passengers was directed to get tested, following the Tuesday local lockdown announcement, and found to be positive. Several other people who were on the vessel have reported feeling unwell and are awaiting test results.

Authorities are now desperately contact tracing in Honiara and more widely. According to the *Solomon Star*, immediately after the MV Akwa transported the COVID infected passenger, the vessel travelled to Malaita province and then returned to the capital "fully packed with traveling passengers."

In Honiara, authorities said they had identified four main areas where the passengers who travelled from Ontong Java Atoll disembarked. One of these, the Lord Howe settlement, is of special concern. This is an impoverished slum, where most homes consist of shacks constructed from wood and corrugated iron. Basic infrastructure is lacking, including sewerage and related sanitation. Like other informal settlements, Lord Howe is periodically affected by disease outbreaks caused by poor sanitation, such as E.coli and diarrhoea.

A 2019 public health research project found that within the Mataniko River settlements, of which Lord Howe is a part, 46 percent of parents reported that their young children had suffered at least one episode of diarrhoea during the previous two weeks. Across the Solomon Islands, diarrhoea is the second leading cause of under-five mortality, with a shocking 10 percent of all children dying from the condition before reaching five years.

The threatened COVID outbreak within Solomon Islands' most oppressed communities is another reflection of the global pandemic's intersection with

pre-existing crises created by capitalism.

Climate change is threatening to destroy the Polynesian community on Ontong Java Atoll. In the last two decades, rising sea levels have wiped out low-lying villages on the atoll. Salination has destroyed fresh water sources and made growing crops impossible. As a result, only a couple of thousand people remain on the atoll. Many others have fled, effectively as climate change refugees, including to the Lord Howe settlement in Honiara.

Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare announced the snap lockdown of the capital yesterday morning at 10 a.m., with restrictions taking effect from 6 p.m. The lockdown is scheduled to last at least 60 hours. No movement in or out of the capital is permitted. Everyone is required to stay in their homes, except for authorised essential services workers. All domestic flights are suspended. International airline passenger services were already suspended, with only humanitarian cargo planes permitted.

The lockdown announcement triggered a rush on shops and banks. According to the *Solomon Star*, some bank outlets closed their doors early, “leaving many customers disappointed and angry... some said many families would go hungry for the next few days.”

The COVID-19 vaccination rate in Solomon Islands remains low. According to the *Our World in Data* website, approximately 9.5 percent of the population have received two doses of vaccine, with another 18 percent having received one dose.

As in other Pacific countries, vaccine hesitancy is a problem. According to one poll conducted last year, 48 percent said they were willing to be vaccinated while the same percentage of respondents said they were not willing. This partly reflects low literacy levels and limited public education infrastructure, but also the reactionary influence of evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity in the country. Missionaries played an important role in subordinating the Solomons’ population to British colonial rule prior to independence in 1978 and their influence continues. Ludicrous social media posts have been circulated that associate the COVID vaccine with Satanism.

An impoverished health infrastructure is a significant barrier to the delivery of vaccines, especially in the rural provinces. According to a 2016 report, there are only 13 practicing doctors in all the 12 provincial

hospitals in Solomon Islands. Some of these hospitals lack reliable electricity supplies. A 2015 World Health Organization review found that just two-thirds of local health facilities had vaccine refrigerators.

The threat now posed by COVID-19 to the country’s population is an indictment of Australian imperialism. In 2003, Canberra launched a neo-colonial takeover of the country on the basis of a bogus humanitarian pretext. Between 2003 and 2017, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) involved nearly \$3 billion in Australian government spending. The vast majority of this was funnelled to Australian contractors and the security apparatus. Only a pittance was allocated to social services and basic infrastructure, including health.



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