

Escalating COVID-19 cases and deaths as Omicron enters Fiji

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Fiji's third wave of COVID-19 cases, which began in early December, has continued to rage over the past month. After initially holding off COVID-19 in 2020 due to strict border controls, the country has now registered a total of 60,509 cases and a death toll of 752, most since mid-2021. Fiji's population is about 900,000.

Following an outbreak last April, Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama resisted calls for a national lockdown, saying it would "destroy" the economy. After peaking in August, case numbers dropped through September before escalating again in December, with 1,524 cases recorded between 20 December and January 2.

The Health Ministry reported the entry of the Omicron variant into the community on January 4, apparently from two cases in managed quarantine. Positive samples sent to Melbourne for genomic sequencing confirmed community transmission of both the Omicron and Delta variants.

Health Secretary James Fong has admitted there are another 655 COVID-19 positive patients who died from serious medical conditions they had before they contracted the virus. These are not being classified as COVID-19 deaths.

Radio New Zealand (RNZ) reported last week that there is "no end in sight" for the Pacific nation, as infections continue to spike. From January 7-20, there were 4,860 new cases reported, including 724 on January 19.

The current wave has coincided with the reckless decision by the government to open the country's borders to international travel on December 1. The move was in line with the clamour from big business and political elites internationally for the global population to "live with the virus." In the Pacific, this

agenda has been propelled by demands to restore the devastated tourism industry, deemed essential to the economies of island businesses.

According to Tourism Fiji, there were 75,000 international bookings for hotels and resorts until the end of January, mostly from Australia, New Zealand and the US—all countries experiencing outbreaks of both Delta and (except for NZ at this stage) Omicron. During December, some 300 international visitors reportedly arrived with COVID-19, which was only subsequently discovered, and they were isolated within segmented parts of their hotels.

On December 30, with case numbers rapidly rising, Fong told the *Fiji Times* that plans to amend curfew hours and close international borders were "still under discussion." However, he flatly declared, if a variant was transmissible enough, the use of stringent border and community measures could "only delay the inevitable entry and spread of current and future variants" of the virus, i.e., claiming the use of basic protective measures is essentially useless.

Questioned further by the *Fiji Times* on January 14, Fong denied that the increase in Omicron cases could solely be attributed to the reopening of the border. He said the Omicron variant was "already in Fiji," before the ministry recorded the first two cases. "The day it was reported, it was already in many of our travel partner countries," he said, adding; "Nobody knew it was there. We only got aware of it after we started opening." Fong did not say where it could have originated.

The purpose of the official obfuscation is to avoid shutting the borders to international tourists. Fong said the border quarantine measures were only focused on "avoiding a variant coming into Fiji that the rest of the world has not yet known about." He did not want Fiji to

experience “all the initial punitive measures that they do against countries” where a case is initially identified.

The government is pursuing the murderous “let it rip” policy, adopted by capitalist governments internationally, against its own people. With more than 92 percent of adults double-vaccinated, Fong falsely declared that this, plus “infection-induced immunity” from a large number of people previously infected, would “help to lower the number of people that develop severe disease.”

As elsewhere, public health measures are being cut back. The isolation period for COVID-19 positive persons has been reduced from 10 days to seven. “You may stop isolating if seven days have passed since the start of symptoms or since the positive test (for asymptomatic cases),” Fong declared. Close contacts are not required to isolate unless they develop symptoms.

On January 4 schools reopened early for Years 8 to 13 to make up the so-called “education gap” from closures during the last term of 2021. Parents were told to send their children to school unless they were not feeling well. Education Minister Premila Kumar said students were expected to comply with the inadequate “COVID-safe” measures, including the wearing of masks.

One parent, Savinesh Karan, told the *Fiji Times* on January 15 that his Year 10 child tested positive for COVID-19 after attending school for two days, then spread it to other members of the household. “We believe that he got it from school, either while he was coming home in the van or from the people in school,” Karan said, adding that it was “much safer for students to stay at home.”

Education Minister Kumar has repeated the mantra being trotted out everywhere to enforce irresponsible school re-openings. “We know that face-to-face learning is vital for the academic achievement, mental and physical health, and overall well-being of our students,” she said, without explaining how the rampant spread of Omicron will benefit children’s health.

On January 14, the first flight into Kiribati in almost two years brought 36 COVID-19 cases from Fiji to the tiny central Pacific nation, which had been virtually untouched by the virus. A security officer involved in

handling the cases also tested positive for the virus. The flight carrying 54 passengers was chartered by a fundamentalist church. Kiribati had opened its international borders on January 10 after being shut since March 2020. The country previously recorded only two COVID-19 cases, from a returning ship in May 2021.

A curfew order was put in place for Kiribati’s population of 119,000 as well as mandatory mask wearing and bans on social gatherings of more than 10 people. The New Zealand website *Stuff* reported that residents were “frustrated” at the slow communication from the Kiribati government as well as the decision to open the border when Fiji was battling a third wave of COVID-19.



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