

COVID outbreak in Tonga after volcanic eruption and tsunami

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The Pacific island nation of Tonga, which has not even begun to recover from the disastrous January 15 volcanic eruption and tsunami, now faces its first potential COVID-19 outbreak.

The impoverished country, with a population of 105,000 spread across dozens of islands, has until now been one of a tiny number of countries that has remained isolated from the devastating pandemic. A single case, which arrived from New Zealand last October, triggered a lockdown and the virus did not spread.

Now, however, the Tongan government was forced to impose a lockdown on Wednesday, which has been extended until Sunday, after five people tested positive for COVID. These cases included two workers who were helping unload aid shipments from the Queen Salote Wharf near the capital Nuku'alofa. The other three cases are the wife and children of one of the workers. More than 700 contacts have since tested negative.

While the source of the cases is reportedly being investigated, the virus appears to have spread from one or more aid shipments sent to Tonga following last month's disaster.

Agence France-Presse reports that "Australia, New Zealand, the United States, China, France, Fiji and Britain have all sent ships carrying relief supplies including drinking water, medical kits and engineering equipment."

The highly infectious Omicron variant of COVID-19 is spreading rapidly in all these countries, except China, which maintains a strict zero COVID policy. Everywhere else, governments have chosen to abandon lockdowns and other public health restrictions, resulting in millions of deaths internationally, all for the sake of keeping big businesses open and making

profits.

The Tongan cases particularly underline the tremendous dangers facing the Pacific region, particularly as the major regional powers—Australia and New Zealand—adopted policies late last year, to allow the Delta and Omicron variants to spread out of control.

Tonga risks a repeat of its experience during the 1918–1919 pandemic, when a ship from New Zealand brought the deadly influenza virus, which eventually killed between 1,000 and 2,000 Tongans. The same ship also infected Samoa, then a NZ colony, killing over 8,500 people (a quarter of the population).

The lack of preparations, including rundown and poorly-equipped hospitals, and low rates of vaccination throughout the Pacific, are also an indictment of the imperialist powers, which have dominated the region for more than a century.

Australia and NZ continue to exercise considerable neo-colonial control over Tonga, Samoa and other parts of the Pacific. Their military-led aid effort in Tonga is not motivated by altruism, but is aimed at strengthening their influence in the region and pushing back against competition from China.

The Australian Defence Force has declared it is unlikely to be the source of the COVID cases, even though its ship, the HMAS Adelaide, reported 23 of its crew had the virus when it arrived in Nuku'alofa on January 26. The ship was reportedly docked at Vuna Wharf, which was not worked by the Tongans who became infected. Despite planning to leave Tonga immediately after making a "contactless" delivery of supplies, as of February 3 the Adelaide and its 600 crew remained stuck due to a major electrical failure on board.

A member of Japan's Air Self-Defense Force who was involved in aid flights to Tonga tested positive for

COVID on January 25, prompting the flights to be temporarily suspended.

The Tongan population is particularly vulnerable to the deadly virus. Only 61 percent are double-vaccinated (83 percent of people over the age of 12) and almost no one has received a third dose, which is necessary to provide meaningful protection against Omicron. Australia is reportedly sending 10,000 booster shots to Tonga, i.e., enough for less than 10 percent of the population.

Tongans also suffer from widespread health problems linked to poverty. According to 2016 statistics, nearly half the population is obese and 40 percent suffers from type 2 diabetes. These are major risk factors for developing severe illness from COVID-19.

The risk of disease spreading is compounded by the tsunami, which wiped out entire villages in some areas, leaving hundreds homeless. Almost all structures on the island of Atata, home to 100 people, have been destroyed, as have those on Mango island, where 50 people lived. Buildings on Fonoï and Nomuka islands were also destroyed, including a health clinic on Nomuka.

Drinking water supplies were contaminated by volcanic ash, which also destroyed food crops and livestock that most Tongans rely on to survive. Scientists believe the marine environment and sea life have also been affected.

Internet communications are severely disrupted due to damage to an undersea cable.

Despite the immense risks to health and human life, Tonga's Health Minister Saia Piukala told a press conference on Thursday that COVID-19 was "here to stay" and people would have to learn to "live with" the virus. This is a warning that the government, controlled by a monarchy and hereditary nobles, has no intention of keeping COVID out of the country.

The pandemic has spread to several Pacific island countries that were until recently isolated from it. The Tongan cases follow recent outbreaks in Kiribati, Palau, Solomon Islands and Samoa.

The Solomon Islands has recorded more than 780 cases and five deaths following an outbreak that began on January 9, after spreading from neighbouring Papua New Guinea, one of the worst-affected countries in the region.

In Kiribati, with just over a third of the population

double-vaccinated, there were 767 known cases as of Wednesday. The outbreak originated with the arrival of the first passenger flight in 10 months, on January 14. Out of 54 passengers, 36 tested positive on arrival.

Rimon Rimon, a freelance journalist in Kiribati, told *Time* magazine on January 31 that people were angry with the decision to open the border to Fiji, where COVID has infected more than 63,000 people and killed 809. "We had two years to prepare for this," he said, "People are saying the government is not doing a good job, what has it been doing for the past few years?" Flights to Kiribati have again been suspended following the outbreak.

The ruling elites across the Pacific, however, continue to push to reopen the borders, even as global infections and deaths from Omicron reach record levels. Governments are seeking to revive the tourism industry and global supply chains, regardless of the immense danger posed to people's lives and health.



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