

COVID-19 disaster intensifies across the Pacific

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After thousands of COVID-19 cases, including of the virulent Omicron strain, gained a foothold in the Pacific last month, the pandemic is running out of control across the region.

The impoverished island countries, which recorded virtually no infections in 2020–2021 due to their geographic isolation and strict border controls, are now battling the virus and seeking to prevent it from overwhelming fragile health and social systems.

Case numbers are climbing in Tonga as the kingdom reels from the devastating January 15 volcanic eruption and tsunami. Recovery work is hampered by the COVID-19 outbreak, with 208 confirmed cases, up from 139 last Monday. Infections are in both main islands of Tongatapu and Vava'u, including the suburbs of the capital Nuku'alofa. Thirty cases are in Hu'atolitoli prison.

Tonga's government imposed a five-day lockdown on February 2, after five people tested positive. The virus appears to have spread from foreign ships bringing aid. The initial cases included two workers who were helping unload ships at the Queen Salote Wharf in the capital. The Australian navy vessel, HMAS Adelaide, reported 23 of its crew had the virus when it arrived on January 26 and made a "contactless" delivery of supplies.

Twenty-five passengers who arrived in Tonga earlier this week have also tested positive. The infected passengers were among 180 Tongan nationals on three repatriation flights from Fiji, New Zealand and Australia.

Conditions in Tonga are dire, with the United Nations warning that more international help is desperately needed. An estimated 85,000 people, about 85 percent of the population, have been directly affected. The government says the recovery will take years.

According to World Bank estimates, there is \$US90.4 million in immediate damage, the equivalent of 18.5 percent of Tonga's GDP.

Journalist Kalafi Moala told *Stuff* on February 12 that the psychological effects of the eruption and now the COVID-19 outbreak are a major concern. Tonga had recovered from natural disasters before, but this is a "different ball game altogether," Moala said, involving "a huge sense of grief and despair."

As governments across the Pacific ease border controls and public health measures in line with their international counterparts, COVID-19 is escalating in their communities. The Cook Islands, a semi-colony of NZ with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants and one of the last remaining countries without COVID-19, has now reported its first cases.

A New Zealand tourist tested positive upon their return home on February 8, after 8 days in the Cook Islands, while the second case arrived on a flight from New Zealand on February 10. The traveller was asymptomatic on arrival but returned a positive result a few hours later. Two close contacts have since tested positive and Prime Minister Mark Brown warned that "silent transmission" in the country is likely.

The Cook Islands and New Zealand governments reopened a "travel bubble" on January 14, enabling travel between the two countries without quarantine restrictions. Cook Islands authorities told TVNZ that despite the danger of an outbreak "the border remains open" and "it's business as usual." Children under the age of 5 can head to the Cooks from March 1 after a travel ban on them was lifted this week. Cook Islands Tourism manager Graeme West declared the move will make the destination "even more attractive to families."

The Kiribati government extended its nationwide lockdown by another two weeks from Friday, due to

widespread community transmission of COVID-19. There have been 2,757 infections across the atoll islands and nine deaths. There were 1,844 cases reported in the last two weeks, the majority in South Tarawa where the capital is located.

The virus was first detected in Kiribati on January 14, when 36 passengers on a charter flight from Fiji tested positive. They were the first travellers to arrive since the borders reopened in over two years, during which time the country had been COVID free.

Fiji's own borders had reopened on December 1 with the health ministry reporting the first Omicron case on January 4, followed quickly by a sharp surge in cases. While numbers have since dropped away, 396 cases were reported from February 4–17. The health crisis has been exacerbated by recent outbreaks of leptospirosis, dengue fever and typhoid, with 14 deaths thus far.

Fiji's government lifted its nationwide curfew on February 7, ending almost 22 months of night-time restrictions. Measures governing public transport, sports events and nightclubs were also relaxed while the use of a contact tracing app is no longer required. Classes in schools and early childhood centres have resumed.

Acting Prime Minister Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum claimed Fiji is “past its worst” with over 90 percent of the population over the age of 15 fully vaccinated (two doses), and the number of people hospitalised declining. Repeating the lie of capitalist governments elsewhere, Sayed-Khaiyum said: “We are moving to a stage where we can remove our blinders and treat COVID as an endemic disease instead of a pandemic, not unlike the common flu.”

The Solomon Islands, free of COVID-19 a month ago, has now recorded nearly 5,000 infections and 61 deaths. The Red Cross said last week authorities reported one in every two people had COVID-19 symptoms. Health Minister Culwick Togamana told the *Solomon Star* that the speed at which the virus spreads “is beyond our testing capabilities, meaning we are under-reporting the actual number of cases, which may be much higher.”

The outbreak began with the illegal entry of a vessel from Papua New Guinea to the atoll of Ontong Java in mid-January. A lockdown in the capital was imposed after a passenger on a ferry that travelled into Honiara

tested positive.

A health catastrophe is developing. Only 12 hospitals cover more than 347 inhabited islands, with 340 health care clinics serving the rural population. The country has just 157 doctors, equating to two fully trained doctors for every 10,000 people. Infectious disease epidemics, including malaria and tuberculosis, have left the health system overwhelmed. Just 11 percent of the 700,000 population are fully vaccinated.

The French Pacific territory of New Caledonia recorded 18,357 cases from February 4, but the French High Commission in Noumea decided against another lockdown. The territory was COVID-19 free until last September when Delta infected thousands and killed more than 280, mainly indigenous Kanaks. There are now a total of 42,848 recorded cases and 287 deaths.

French Polynesia also reported 8,739 cases over the past fortnight. The territory first opened its borders in July 2020 for quarantine-free travel to boost tourism. President Edouard Fritch declared that without re-opening, the economic consequences would be “catastrophic.” COVID quickly spread to 45 islands, including Tahiti, and has reached a total of 58,260 cases with 637 deaths.

Papua New Guinea (PNG), the largest and most vulnerable country in the region, is open for quarantine-free travel for vaccinated visitors from this week. Domestic regulations have also been loosened with the lifting of all COVID-19 restrictions on public transportation. PNG has recorded over 2,000 cases this month but with testing having all but collapsed, the figure will be much higher.

Prime Minister James Marape cut short a visit to China this month after catching the virus. Marape absurdly declared that when people get infected, they can “live with it in almost a normal manner.” PNG has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the world, with less than 3 percent of the 9 million population fully vaccinated.



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