

# COVID-19 deaths escalate across the Pacific

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Thousands of COVID-19 cases, including of the virulent Omicron strain, which gained a foothold in Pacific nations in January, are continuing to be recorded across the region. Tonga, Samoa, American Samoa, and Vanuatu all recently recorded their first COVID-related deaths.

The Pacific islands, which saw virtually no infections in 2020–2021 due to their geographic isolation, small populations and strict border controls, are now battling outbreaks—even as local governments end restrictions in line with the global drive to open borders and economies at the expense of public health measures.

Health experts and aid organisations fear the virus could be devastating to the impoverished countries, made more vulnerable by fragile health care systems and high rates of noncommunicable diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease.

In Tonga, COVID-19 infections are continuing to climb as the kingdom reels from the destructive January 15 volcanic eruption and tsunami. Prime Minister Hu’akavameiliku Siaosi Sovaleni has recently been in self-isolation, along with half the cabinet, after testing positive for COVID.

On March 21, the government imposed a week of new lockdown rules after health authorities recorded a total of 1,819 active cases and the country’s first 2 deaths, a figure which has now risen to 6. Some COVID victims initially had their deaths attributed to other illnesses.

Before this year, Tonga, with a population of 105,000, had recorded just one COVID-19 case. By April 1 there were 6,423. The outbreak began with two port workers unloading ships bringing in aid to the capital Nuku’alofa following the eruption. The Australian navy vessel, HMAS Adelaide, had reported 23 of its crew were infected with the virus when it arrived on January 26, but the ship has not been confirmed as the source.

A lockdown in early February was eased by the government, allowing the virus to spread. Now a daily average of 229 new infections are being recorded. Tonga has administered 147,193 doses of COVID vaccines, enough to have vaccinated just 70.4 percent of the population. At the current rate, it will take a further 80 days to cover the next 10 percent of the population. This does not include booster doses needed to counter the Omicron variant.

Tonga is dealing with a double disaster. Editor of *Matangi Tonga*, Pesi Fonua, told Radio New Zealand that the volcanic eruption recovery has been severely hampered by the COVID-19 outbreak. Under the recent “hard” lockdown all businesses, including retail and petrol stations, were closed for a week. The public, with essential health workers exempted, were only allowed to venture out between 8am and 8pm to go to health facilities and tend to plantations.

The eruption of the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha’apai volcano left more than 84 percent of the country covered with volcanic ash. The cost of recovery is estimated to be more than \$US90 million. Officials estimate more than \$US20m in damages to the agriculture sector, which involves roughly 86 percent of the population. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization has warned the ash could delay or stunt harvests and impact fisheries, crops and livestock.

At the end of March, Samoa, American Samoa and Vanuatu all reported their first COVID -related deaths. The Samoan fatality, of a 67-year-old man, came 13 days after the first community transmission case was detected on March 17. Fifteen initial infections were passengers on a repatriation flight from New Zealand in early March. Case numbers have since risen sharply to 2,331 with over 1,500 active. Health Ministry data shows that 101 children under five have tested positive, with infections significantly higher among those aged

from 15 to 35.

The Samoan government extended an existing lockdown for another two weeks on March 24 because of the rapid community spread. Prime Minister Fiame Naomi Mata'afa said the surge in cases was "expected" and would continue to increase due to the transmissibility of the virus. Only 66 percent of the population is double vaccinated.

Notwithstanding the ongoing surge of the disease and risks involved, cabinet last week reduced the quarantine time for visitors to seven days. Over 200 passengers on a March 29 flight from New Zealand were the first to quarantine for a week rather than 14 days. The move is particularly reckless given New Zealand is grappling with an Omicron outbreak that has resulted in nearly 400 deaths so far. In October 2019, a measles outbreak in Samoa, originating in Auckland, led to 83 deaths, mostly of children.

Vanuatu's Ministry of Health also confirmed the first two Covid-19 related deaths in the country on March 31. Minister Bruno Lengkon said the victims, a 22-year-old woman from Port Vila and a five-year old boy, both had underlying conditions. The total number of confirmed cases since the beginning of 2022 is now 3,881.

Authorities are blaming "hesitation" about vaccinations, especially in the capital. Only 27.7 percent of the 307,000 population is double vaccinated. Meanwhile, the first 20,000 AstraZeneca vaccines have been destroyed after they expired. The Ministry said they arrived on time but were not used soon enough.

Low vaccination rates across the Pacific are bound up with the policies of vaccine inequity, which have seen wealthy countries appropriate supplies of vaccines for their own use, as well as the low numbers of the necessary medical equipment and personnel to carry out mass campaigns. According to World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, 75 percent of the world's vaccines have been administered in just 10 countries.

Vaccine access has been thwarted by nationalism, profiteering and opposition by the imperialist powers to any coordinated international campaign to combat the pandemic. The situation across the Pacific is exacerbated by the legacy of a century of neo-colonial domination, which has left the region with disastrously low levels of health and education infrastructure.

In Vanuatu, life expectancy is just 67 years for men, and 70 for women. Health expenditure per capita is under a quarter of the Western Pacific regional average. There is a severe shortage of qualified health care professionals and equipment. Travel restrictions due to the pandemic meant that overseas health specialists could not enter to undertake consultation and treatment work or for training of the local health workforce.

American Samoa recorded its first death from the virus on March 22. The number of COVID cases in the US territory has been climbing steadily since the first community case appeared in mid-February. Total cumulative infections have reached 2,751.

In mid-March, the StarKist Samoa tuna cannery, the territory's largest private employer, was allowed to reopen after being closed for two weeks due to the community spread of COVID. The chairman of the COVID-19 Task force, Lieutenant Governor Talauega Eleasalo Ale, said authorities decided to move away from "mass and indiscriminate lockdown" policies and place emphasis on "self-responsibility."

Elsewhere across the region, the Solomon Islands has recorded 11,470 cases at a rate of nearly 300 a day and 133 deaths. Nauru last week confirmed its first two infections, both detected in quarantine after a flight from Brisbane. Kiribati has 3,066 cases and 13 deaths, forcing the government to extend a curfew for another month. The Cook Islands, despite registering 1,442 infections between March 19 and April 1, is preparing to reopen its borders to the world and ease remaining COVID restrictions.



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