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16/04/2020



Bula Vinaka.

I want to start the briefing today with the latest on our response to the devastation of Cyclone Harold. After being thoroughly health screened, our disaster officials have arrived with food, shelter kits, and medical supplies to Vatulele, Kadavu, Beqa, Yanuca and Southern Lau, we've shipped water to areas that need

it as well. Deployments to the Yasawa and Mamanuca groups will depart this evening. Our evacuees are gradually returning home, but those who need to stay will continue to be fed and looked after. The Director NDMO is here with me to take any questions relating to our Cyclone Harold response.



We remain in a state of natural disaster from Cyclone Harold. Today, we are declaring another state of natural disaster in response to the coronavirus threat, because it is clear we need to bring every resource in government to bear to take on the crises of contagion and climate change before us.


Our coronavirus containment remains focussed on our three high-risk locales: The Nabua settlement in Suva, the quarantine facilities in Nadi, and the Soasoa settlement and other areas in the North.

Our first 16 patients living with coronavirus are all in stable condition. Yesterday, after testing ten samples we recorded no new positive cases of coronavirus. Today, however, one of our 25 tested samples returned positive — that of a 21-year-old man in Vanua Levu. This gentleman is a relative and travelling companion of case nine; they travelled together from India to Singapore and on to Fiji.

Since his return to Fiji, this young man has not shown a single symptom of the virus. You will recall our original case definition for virus testing required that patients display symptoms. Upon returning to the country from overseas, this young man was in self-quarantine for two full weeks, up until the 5th of April. Free of any symptoms throughout the virus's known two-week incubation period, by all appearances, he was in the clear.

But as experts have unveiled more about the insidious nature of this virus, and our understanding of the disease has evolved, the way we define and contain cases must evolve as well. From this week, we've widened our testing to all close contacts of all our confirmed cases, regardless of whether they are displaying symptoms. That's how we identified, tested and confirmed this gentleman as our 17th case. He was immediately entered into isolation upon testing positive today where he is in stable condition. His close contacts have been entered into separate isolation facilities.

This all goes to show that the knowns of this virus pale in comparison to the unknowns. What we do know is this: physical distancing is the only strategy that stops this virus. The disease cannot move if its carrier doesn't — so while there is no medical cure, time and distance are two sure-fire ways to put a stop to its transmission.

But as we have seen, the time that is needed to ensure it cannot be spread can be far longer than the world first thought. And it's why we are now extending the quarantine period to a full 28 days, both for anyone who is newly-quarantined and to those who currently are waiting out their initial 14-day period. So, for example, if you are on day seven of your quarantine, you will remain in quarantine for 21 more days. Anyone whose quarantine has ended will not go back 

quarantine, but they will continue to be monitored by the Ministry of Health until they meet the full 28-day threshold.

Our contact tracing stemming from this latest case has revealed the need for additional lockdowns on Vanua Levu. The Vunicagi Settlement between Nabowalu and Labasa will be locked down for the next 28 days. The settlement lies along a short stretch of vital highway which vehicles will still be allowed to traverse under 24/7 police monitoring, as no alternate routes into Labasa exist. However, no passengers will be allowed to disembark or embark: No one in and no one out.

Our lockdown of the Soasoa settlement as well will be extended another 14 days, in line with our 28-day quarantine policy. Given the continued risk of transmission on Vanua Levu, our ban on inter-island travel by air and sea will remain in effect.

Meanwhile, there is good news to report in Suva. Around 180,000 Fijians in the Suva confined have been screened by our mobile teams and at our fever clinics — well beyond our target of 150,000, and an impressive two-thirds of the total population of our largest urban hub. Today, that total will likely surpass 230,000, meaning that when combined with previous screenings in Lautoka, over 280,000 Fijians have been screened.

This represents the most ambitious public health screening campaign in Fijian history. That success is shared by our healthcare heroes, our disciplined forces and the thousands of Fijians who stepped up and got themselves screened. We've also successfully identified and quarantined all of the close contacts of our Suva COVID-19 cases — these Fijians will remain in quarantine for 28 days.

We know the triumph of a single battle doesn't assure our victory against this virus. We know we're still in for long and difficult months ahead. But winning these small battles day after day after day is what will win us the war. We'll need to see similar successes replicated many times over in the months to come as we expand large-scale screening to Nadi, Ba, Tavua, Rakiraki, Labasa, Savusavu, Sigatoka and Korovou.

The progress of our screening and contact tracing has kept us on track to lift the lockdown of the Suva confined area by 5am tomorrow. The Nabua settlement however — the site of two of our coronavirus cases — is still a high-risk region. Given how long this virus has proven it can stay dormant, the Nabua settlement will remain locked down for an additional 14 days.

I want to be crystal clear with everyone watching: Even though the Suva lockdown is lifting, every other life-saving directive in place will remain in place. The nationwide curfew remains in effect. Nightclubs stay closed. Gyms stay closed. Cinemas stay closed. Pools stay closed. F

gatherings are not permitted. Physical distancing of two metres from all others should be maintained at all times. The end of the lockdown is not cause for celebration. It is not a reason to have large grog sessions or drinking parties. It is not a justification to stay out past 8pm. It is not an excuse to leave your homes for no good reason.

In the West, Fijians who have returned from overseas remain under closely supervised quarantine. One flight is arriving tomorrow from Auckland — every passenger aboard will head straight to one of these facilities. As I said earlier, the period of quarantine is now 28 days. If you've already been released from quarantine after returning from overseas, prepare for a visit from health officials.

Schools were scheduled to open next week Monday. Instead, schools will not open until the 15th of June, an extension that recognises that this virus will be part of our lives for the foreseeable future, and we must plan accordingly. The date schools reopen is subject to change based on the situation on the ground at the time. The Minister for Education joins me today to talk about how her ministry will continue to ensure that learning materials are distributed for at-home schooling, technology will be impactfully utilised, teachers and parents will be engaged and how students can utilise this as an opportunity for upskilling and professional development.

So, even though the Suva lockdown will be lifted tomorrow morning at 5am, I want today's main takeaway to be that every other health protection measure remains in effect and will be enforced. Every would-be law-breaker can bet that they will be arrested and they will be charged if they flout any of these measures.

The coronavirus is the most complex and devastating global crisis of our lifetimes. We should all respect how vital our health protection measures are to the wellbeing of every Fijian. We need every Fijian behind them. Because as we've seen from the beginning, we are stronger together. And only together can the war against this virus be won.

Thank you. God bless you all, and God bless Fiji.

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