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MINISTRY OF HEALTH & MEDICAL SERVICES



PRESS RELEASE SPEECHES

Statement By The Prime Minister Hon. Voreqe Bainimarama On New COVID-19 Cases In Fiji

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STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER HON. VOREQE BAINIMARAMA ON NEW COVID-19 CASES IN FIJI

02/04/2020

Bula Vinaka, members of the media.

As you may have noticed, we have a new mic set-up for reporters to use so that everyone watching can hear your questions. You'll also see we've strictly designated where members of the media can stand in the interest of putting physical distancing into practice. So, keep your distance back there. Seriously.

This is the latest on Fiji's war against coronavirus. As of today the 2nd of April, the first five COVID-19 patients remain in stable condition. None have been cleared as recovered.

This morning, we confirmed two new cases of COVID-19 in Fiji. Our sixth case is a 21-year-old woman and our seventh case is her 33-year-old husband. Again, our medical teams were well-prepared to get to these patients quickly, test them and move them securely and hygienically into isolation.

The two individuals are a couple living together in the Nabua Settlement in Suva. The sixth patient — the 21-year-old wife — developed symptoms on Saturday, the 28th of March. She informed the Ministry of Health on the 1st of April. Our teams visited her home, and tested her that same day. Her partner, the 33-year-old husband reported symptoms on the 31st of March. He was tested the same day as his wife.

It's important to note that the symptoms of these two newest cases started with just a runny nose when they called the Ministry of Health for testing. I can't stress enough — if you have any symptoms at all, even something as minor as a runny nose, immediately dial 158, our new, 24-hour toll-free coronavirus helpline.

Both patients have been transported securely and hygienically in an ambulance to the Navua Hospital Isolation Ward where both are in stable condition. The couple shared a home with their daughter; she has been taken into isolation as well.

Our contact tracing teams are now identifying all of their close contacts and directing them into self-quarantine.

My fellow Fijians, it appears that our newest two cases are unrelated to our first five cases. We're actively identifying all of these individuals' close contacts. We've identified a contact who lived at home with these two patients after returning from India as the likeliest transmitter of the virus. This person has been placed into isolation in Labasa Hospital, but we cannot comment further until testing confirms this person as the source.

Some of these two patients' personal details were — unfortunately — leaked to the public. I've just come from the Ministry of Health, I can tell you their staff are devastated that someone is leaking confidential information. These leaks have made their jobs far more difficult and every time people on Facebook share this leaked information, they do so at the expense of the doctors, nurses and other medical staff trying their absolute best to inform the public in an accurate and timely manner. The Police are currently investigating this matter — when they find whoever did the leak, they will be taken to task.

These two new cases are the most serious developments to-date. Unlike our other case in the Suva area who was immediately self-quarantined and then isolated, there is a high risk these patients have infected others, as they not only lived in close contact with other families in their settlement, but served in very public-facing job: Both patients worked as hairdressers, one at the Jade Salon at MHCC and the other at the Super Cuts in Damodar City Suva. We've been informed both individuals stopped working from the 28th of March, but witness accounts have thrown those accounts into doubt. We need to respond as if both individuals were working while showing symptoms, and take assertive action to contain the virus.

That is why, just as we did in the Lautoka confined area, all of the greater Suva area will be going on lockdown — a tactic that we're embracing because it has proven effective in containing the spread. We've drawn up the borders of a Suva confined area

— as you can see on the map behind me. For a period of 14 days, we'll be closing off entry and exit at the following checkpoints, starting from 5am tomorrow morning, the 3rd of April: the Delanavesi Bridge on the Queen's Road, the Sawani Junction, and the Nausori Bridge.

Within the greater Suva confined area:

- The greater public will not be allowed in or out -- only those traveling for medical purposes will be allowed through checkpoints.
- All non-essential businesses will be closed.
- Supermarkets and shops selling food will remain open so that people can buy food.
- Restaurants can remain open, so long as they cut seating capacity below 20 people, practice safe physical distancing between tables and at queues, and must focus on takeaway and delivery orders.
- Banks will remain open so that people can get money.
- Pharmacies will remain open so that people can get medicine.
- FNPF will remain open so that people can access funds.
- Essential business will remain open. Just like Lautoka, that list includes air and rescue services, air traffic control services, civil aviation, telecommunication services, food and sanitary manufacturing plants, electricity services, emergency services, fire services, health and hospital services, lighthouse services, meteorological services, mine pumping, ventilation and winding, sanitary services, supply and distribution of fuel and gas, power, telecommunications, garbage collection, transport services, water and sewage services, FNPF and FRCS, civil service, private security services and roading services. If your business is not on this list, close it down. As for civil servants, continue to go to work unless your Permanent Secretary has informed you to work from home.
- Markets will remain open but -- as Minister Kumar has explained on earlier occasions -- we are decentralising markets into satellite markets to prevent the sort of dangerous overcrowding that spurs the spread of the virus; and
- Given some Fijians need to seek specialised treatment at facilities in Suva, the checkpoints will allow these individuals who need to undergo surgery or receive kidney dialysis treatment.

In order to ensure resident in greater Suva area can access life-sustaining services:

- The port of Suva will remain open for international freight shipping and inter-island cargo shipping; any passenger travel, however, remains forbidden; and
- We will implement the same AMA arrangement we introduced in the Lautoka confined area to get food and produce into the Suva confined area. At all three checkpoints, suppliers can arrange with a police driver to ensure that produce still comes into Suva, and we don't let the virus escape the confined area.

The point is, food and essential goods will remain on the shelves of our shops and supermarkets. Do not run to the supermarkets and buy up goods this afternoon — doing so will crowd these stores and put every shopper at-risk.

Nationwide, more health protection measures will be coming into effect:

- From tomorrow night, the 3rd of April, our nationwide curfew will now begin earlier, starting at 8pm and extending until 5am. If you're travelling for work or as a result of a medical emergency, you can travel during these hours. Otherwise, don't add your name to the ever-growing list of violators.
- Also from tomorrow, the 3rd of April, social gatherings will be banned entirely, everywhere in Fiji. Our 20 person limit now applies only to the workplace. Two people, three people, it doesn't matter -- no more social gatherings. Do not have visitors over to your homes. Your interactions should be limited entirely to those already living in your households. If you're missing a friend or loved one, do the safe thing and call them on the phone. If you need to walk around or exercise you may do so, but keep a safe distance of two metres from other people while outside.
- Bus operators, drivers, and riders must take measures to ensure physical distancing is practiced on all of Fiji's buses. Spread out as much as possible, sanitise your seats, and do not come into contact with others.

As you know we've extended the restrictions locking down the Lautoka confined area until at least 5am on Tuesday, the 7th of April. But we're making a couple of small changes:

- Restaurants can now operate, so long as they follow our safety guidelines, focusing on safe physical distancing and takeaway and delivery services; and
- The boundaries of the confined area will be open to those who are seeking emergency medical care or kidney dialysis. Under close police escort, these individuals travel from the checkpoints directly to Lautoka Hospital.

My fellow Fijians, I'm confident the vast majority of people watching know we cannot afford to lose the war against this virus. I know most Fijians are following and respecting the rules we've put in place — but too many still aren't. So, if you've been sitting in Suva feeling as if this virus isn't your problem, or that somehow your behaviour hasn't needed to change — get a grip. This virus is here and it is serious. Anyone, anywhere could be a carrier. If people follow the government's directives, we *will* lock this virus down and win this war. If people don't, many people will die. It is just that simple.

There is no "magic bullet" to defeat COVID-19. There is no vaccine. There is no quick-fix, and there is no cure. There is only one strategy that's proven to stop coronavirus, and that is changing our behaviour right now to stop its spread.

As we've been saying for weeks: every person in Fiji needs to keep a safe distance of two metres between yourself and all others at all times. Whether you live in Lautoka, Suva, or anywhere in Fiji: Stay at home unless it is absolutely necessary that you leave. If you are leaving your home, ask yourself: Does my life or my livelihood depend on what I'm doing? If the answer is no, get back indoors and stay there – staying home saves lives.

Report any symptoms you're feeling as soon as they develop by calling our COVID-19 Call Centre on toll-free number 158 or visit one of our fever clinics. Stop sharing bilos and takis. Stop shaking hands, touching, and embracing. Stop the touch rugby matches and other close contact with others. Wash your hands with soap and water, for 20 seconds, multiple times a day.

We're closely watching the behaviour of all Fijians, and if these habits aren't changed on your own accord, we aren't afraid to scale up our enforcement to contain COVID-19. We can achieve this one of two ways: By your willing cooperation, or by heavy-handed action. For every Fijian, this will be much easier if you follow our directives — but if not, we will be forced to crack down with a nationwide 24-hour curfew.

By the grace of God, and likely by virtue of our young population, all of Fiji's first seven cases have been in young, healthy patients. But this isn't always going to be the case. Make no mistake, if Fijians don't change their behaviour, the elderly and vulnerable will be infected, and we will see a sharp rise in cases and, likely, deaths.

Come tomorrow, the world will pass one million confirmed cases of COVID-19. The real numbers are likely much higher, as countries across the globe — with healthcare systems that are stretched thin — are only able to confirm the most severe cases upon hospitalisation.

Fiji was one of the last countries on Earth to confirm cases, so we were blessed to have a glimpse into the future, and how bad this pandemic can become if society fails to act. It would be foolish, and self-destructive, to waste this blessing, and willingly choose inaction when we can literally see our own fate unfold on the news in China, Italy, Spain, and the United States of America.

If Fijians do not take this seriously, that will be our reality. We don't know how long our national borders will be closed, because no one can say for certain how long it will be until the world rids itself of this virus. But we must take every day one at a time, not as a reason for despair, but as an opportunity for containment. Our greatest hope is in the hands of every Fijian; please, for the fate of our country and those we love, do what we've directed you to do. Don't let this opportunity go to waste.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you, and God bless Fiji.

Riaz Hassan

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📅 September 20, 2019 👤 Riaz Hassan

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Prime Minister Hon.... ▶

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