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MINISTRY OF HEALTH & MEDICAL SERVICES

SPEECHES

PRIME MINISTER VOREQE BAINIMARAMA'S STATEMENT ON COVID-SAFE ECONOMIC RECOVERY

📅 June 22, 2020 👤 Riaz Hassan 💬 Comments Off

Last Updated on 5 months by [Riaz Hassan](#)

21/06/2020

Bula vinaka and a very good afternoon to you all.

On the 19th of March, Fiji confirmed our first case of the coronavirus.

Finally faced with the same enemy we had watched devastate highly-developed nations, we put fear aside and found faith in action. That same day, we announced a complete lockdown of the Lautoka area. In the coming weeks, we locked down the greater Suva area and parts of Vanua Levu as new cases were confirmed. Nationwide, we decisively rolled out public measures — backed by strict enforcement — to stop COVID in its tracks. We traced every known contact of every known case. And — as the virus surged overseas — Fiji slowly but surely broke every known chain of transmission in the country.

It's now 64 days since we confirmed our last new case of the virus and well over two weeks since the last of our patients registered full recoveries and returned home to their families. With no deaths recorded, Fiji has also led the world in the most reliable metrics of testing. Our progress has come despite contending with patients who went for weeks without showing symptoms.



That's all to say: zero cases does not mean zero risks. So, rushing back to life as we knew it can't happen. But neither can we shut Fiji off from the world forever, locking our people out of jobs and paralyzing entire industries, like tourism.

Rather, as one of the few nations on Earth to register such resounding success against the coronavirus, it has come to Fiji to light the way towards a post-COVID society — to show the world how we can safely live again. Not by blindly stumbling ahead, but by confidently stepping forward, vigilant to both risks and opportunities.

So, while some of you may be tuning in to hear about an easing of restrictions, I'm not here to talk about “returning to normal”. Today marks the start of a new normal to adapt to the new world we now live in.

Much like our campaign to adapt Fiji to the rising seas and stronger storms brought by climate change, we must build our resilience to this virus from the ground up, not with seawalls of stone or concrete, but through the way each of us live our lives. Above all, this “new normal” demands social adaptation. We need to set a new standard of care among our people for their communities, their families, their relatives, neighbours and especially, for our most vulnerable citizens — those most at-risk from COVID-19.

Today, we'll be announcing “Phase 2” of Fiji's COVID-Safe Economic Recovery, laying out a framework for long-term changes in how we can get people back in their jobs, how we revitalise our industries, how we welcome visitors back to our shores and how we progressively rebuild Fiji's economy to its full, historic strength, all while keeping health at the forefront of every decision.

To keep pace with the ever-changing state of global affairs and remain in line with the best available medical information, this framework is flexible. New rules can come into play at any time, as has been the case from day one.

This afternoon, I'll be giving you a general overview of Phase 2. But all of the details of each phase, including every new business policy and border control, will be published in full online — be sure to look to the Fijian Government's website and Facebook page for more. A press briefing will be held later this afternoon with representatives from our entire COVID-Safe Economic Recovery Team, including our health experts, to provide further detail and answer any questions you may have.

Our Ministry Economy has been working intimately with the ministries of Health and Medical Services, Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport, business houses and various organisations to guide this COVID-Safe framework, and will continue to do so in overarching collaboration with our medical experts to ensure health compliance in the days, weeks, and months ahead.

We've tied this next phase of our COVID response to the launch of the careFIJI App, a powerful new tool that allows us to notify users if they are exposed to the coronavirus. This App forms the foundation of Phase 2 of our recovery, and of the new normal we're working to create.



I'd ask all those watching to try and think of every person they've spent 15 minutes or more with over the past 28 days— it's difficult, isn't it? careFIJI makes it easy.

We'll be playing a video after my remarks to explain exactly how it works. But, essentially, careFIJI uses Bluetooth technology on our phones to make contact tracing much faster and more accurate. It's built on the very same technology that both Singapore and Australia have used to launch their own contact-tracing apps.

So, God forbid another COVID-positive person is among the public, if they have careFIJI installed, this App will allow the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to quickly notify any other careFIJI users who have been in contact with that individual.

If used by enough people, this will “break the chain” in a faster, more highly-targeted way. This would allow Fiji to limit the need for broader public health measures, like lockdowns.

And careFIJI will do far more than make our contact tracing more efficient and effective. It will instill a sense of confidence in other countries — showing the world, and our tourists, that Fiji is perhaps the safest nation on Earth to live, work, and holiday in. It will bring back lost jobs of our friends and neighbours. It will restore lost income, and put us back on track to economic greatness. That peace of mind has the potential to be the most powerful marketing campaign in Fijian history.

But the success of this App ultimately rests in the hearts and hands of every Fijian. So I cannot stress enough — the easiest way that you can help save lives and livelihoods, and to show that you care for Fiji's recovery, is to download careFIJI and keep your Bluetooth turned on at all times.

If you have a smartphone, open Google Playstore or the Apple App store, search for careFIJI — you'll see the same logo like those around me now — download it now, and switch on your Bluetooth. And just like that, you've already done your part to help return to a new normal.

Because the App uses Bluetooth and not data for its core function, careFIJI itself takes almost no data to use once it's installed. careFIJI is designed to be as easy, secure, and hassle-free as possible.

And if you're worried about the data this App will use to install, don't be. It takes around 10 megabytes to install the App. Once you do, thanks to an agreement struck by the Ministry of Communications, both Vodafone and Digicel have agreed to reimburse their customers with ten times that amount — 100 megabytes — free of charge.

Our digitalFIJI team has developed a dedicated website which provides additional information about the careFIJI app. You can visit the website data-free by going to www-dot-carefiji-dot-digitalfiji-dot-gov-dot-fj.



Government is leading that push through example by mandating that all users of government issued phones, members of the disciplined forces, and users with phones issued by government-funded statutory bodies, download the careFIJI App.

Entities in which the government holds an interest and social welfare recipients, other government assistance beneficiaries as well as civil servants should all download careFIJI. We'll also be working closely with our private sector partners, particularly those in key economic sectors with large staff numbers, to encourage uptake of the App.

But that's not all the rigour Phase 2 demands. We're asking every business, of every size and across every industry, to be leaders in your respective fields by drawing up their own gameplans for running safe, COVID-proofed operations. Every business in Fiji has the responsibility of adhering to our COVID-safe protocols, which have been comprehensively outlined, by industry, in the framework that will be posted online.

We aren't sending the police to every workplace in the country to enforce these policies, this strategy relies on self-regulation — it relies on businesses stepping up and doing the right thing for their customers and for their country. But if businesses aren't complying, we won't hesitate to go back on the easing of restrictions.

In Phase 2, our nationwide curfew will remain in effect, but to allow for more economic activity and freedom of movement, it will now be enforced from 11pm and lifted at 4am. This is not just a matter of health, but a matter of public wellbeing. We've heard from countless Fijians, asking that the curfew be kept, saying that they feel safer with these restrictions.

For that reason, effective from tomorrow, Monday, the 22nd of June, the Fiji Police Force will be enforcing curfew from the hours of 11pm until 4am. That revised curfew will remain in effect until further notice.

For many of the same reasons, nightclubs will stay closed.

At the moment, gatherings of more than 20 people are banned. We had good reason to do so, as mass gatherings have been epicentres of outbreaks the world over. From Monday, the 22nd of June, we'll be relaxing this restriction, allowing for gatherings up to 100 individuals. For the time being, this 100-person limit will apply to weddings, funerals, cafes, restaurants, conferences and other community gatherings.

And all throughout Fiji, we need to start gathering not as large, uncontrolled masses, but as self-contained groupings.

I know our COVID restrictions have been difficult for Fijians of all faiths, as we often look to our religion to find comfort in times of contention and suffering. Meanwhile, across the world, we've seen large-scale outbreaks start in houses of worship, as families and friends greet, gather, and embrace — and we couldn't let the same fate befall Fiji.

That's why, over the past months, I've been proud to see Fijian Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and all worshippers find new ways to connect with God, even as some of the holiest days of religious calendars have passed. I thank religious leaders and



Effective from Friday, the 26th of June, we're allowing houses of worship to re-open their doors to 100 worshippers at a time. Starting tomorrow, over the next three to four days, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services will be meeting with religious leaders to talk about how the "new normal" will look in houses of worship, and how they can adapt to protect Fijians who come to them. Science shows serious risks in houses of worship because of the close proximity, the intimacy of congregations and practices such as indoor singing — so we'll be working hand-in-hand with our churches, mosques, and temples to explain and limit these unique challenges.

Because now more than ever, houses of worship need to be not a source of risk, but of refuge.

We are asking each church, mosque, and temple to share the burden of responsibility, and look after your worshippers with the same duty of care that is at the centre of all our efforts. Set up hand-washing stations. Limit physical contact, encourage distancing measures and consider holding more services to ensure adherence to the 100-person limit. And please, as the world continues to grapple with the pandemic and Fijians find themselves out of work, pray for relief and continued protection from COVID-19.

There are over 238,000 students in Fijian schools across the country That's larger than the population of many of Pacific Island countries.

We didn't rush back to reopening schools for good reason. Medical experts initially suspected children were some of the fastest spreaders of the virus. The latest studies have shown children aren't the super-spreaders the experts initially thought they were, but they are not completely risk-free. So, we needed to rethink the way we educate our children, by COVID-proofing our education system as much as possible.

Our plan to reopen schools has catered for a realigned school curriculum, ensuring that all of Fiji's schools are on the same page. It simply wouldn't be fair for children in different schools to be disadvantaged just because of where they live, and which school they attend, whether public or private.

That's why we've taken the time to address our re-opening for the remainder of the 2020 school year with particular care, and will be resuming education in two stages:

To safely ease back into the academic calendar and give our school leaders the space to adjust, Year 12 and Year 13 students in our secondary schools will start classes on Tuesday, 30 June. This will allow them to get back into preparing for their exams — a top priority to avoid longer-term disruption. Tertiary institutions as well can open for face-to-face classes from 30 June.

The rest of the primary and secondary schools — as well as early childhood education — will open one week later, on Monday, the 6th of July.



Ministry of Education at the press briefing later today.

Gyms, fitness centres and swimming pools — both public pools and those at hotels — will be permitted to re-open from Monday, the 22nd of June. Operators must keep these facilities clean and maintain contact tracing information for every person who uses their facilities by checking for careFIJI installation and keeping a manual log for those who don't have smartphones.

Contact sports simply weren't safe when community-based transmission posed a threat. With Fiji's outbreak contained, we can safely reclaim our status as the beating heart of world rugby, and welcome back football, boxing and all other contact sports as well.

Fijians are a sporting people and I know how much it means to fans across Fiji to attend games and see our athletes in action. We'll be permitting live sporting events to resume, but with restrictions. Our formal indoor and outdoors sporting venues can host sporting events with spectators at 50 per cent capacity, so long as physical distancing is maintained within the venue. For informal sports events at the community level, the 100-person limit applies. We'll review this policy in the very near future. Again, we look forward to the cooperation of sporting event organisers and — I can't stress this enough — all spectators must download the careFIJI App.

If any athlete at any level of play is feeling unwell, stay home. Officials will be responsible for symptom screenings, and should not allow anyone who is sick to play.

With the gyms back open and all sports open for play, I hope more Fijians take advantage of these opportunities to take greater ownership over their health and wellbeing. This is a virus that preys on those with underlying health conditions, like NCDs. Healthier people handle it better and recover more reliably. I urge everyone to use this reopening to recommit to fitness. By doing so, we do some of the most important work of stepping up our people's resilience to COVID-19.

Our cinemas will also be able to re-open their doors from tomorrow, but under various conditions. Cinemas will be limited to 50 per cent of capacity. All groupings of theatre-goers — friends and family members who attend and sit together — will be required to sit 1.5 metres apart from other groupings or individuals. In between each showing, service areas need to be wiped down, seats deep cleaned and public areas must be thoroughly sanitised.

And if you're going to go to the movies, be prepared to quickly show your careFIJI App.

Our medical experts and economists agree: we can't risk the health and economic losses of keeping our borders shut forever. Instead, we will carefully reopen our borders in a highly-controlled manner. By slowly and safely bringing back vital tourism revenue to Fiji, we will in fact be saving lives — the long-term cost of complete closures and unemployment would risk doing immense harm to Fijians' mental and physical health. This is the best way to economically adjust to the "new normal" in a way that considers all aspects of Fijians' wellbeing.



To lay the groundwork for integrated public health approaches critical to the reopening of our borders, Fiji's leading medical experts — Dr Aalisha, Dr Fong and Dr Tudravu — are in talks with Professor Paul Kelly, Australia's Deputy Chief Medical Officer, and are liaising with Professor Michael Baker, the Head of the University of Otago's Public Health Department. This international, doctor-to-doctor collaboration will continue as we forge forward.

While Australia and New Zealand work out their Trans-Tasman bubble, Fiji's equal — or arguably, greater — success against the virus puts us in a position to take the lead in the Pacific. We're working on our own bubble — a "Bula Bubble", between Fiji, New Zealand and Australia.

Working with Fiji Airways and Tourism Fiji, we'll be welcoming Aussies and Kiwis to holiday in Fiji in a manner that is carefully controlled and safely insulated. Everywhere they go will be wholly dedicated to others who match the same criteria, safely guided by what we're calling "VIP lanes" — allowing them to Vacation In Paradise.

To come to Fiji, Australian and New Zealand tourists can do one of the following:

Option One: Intending travellers must present a certificate from a recognised medical institution certifying their 14 days of quarantine in their home country, along with proof of a negative COVID test result within 48 hours of their departure for Fiji, at which point they can immediately start their "Bula Bubble" holiday within confined VIP lanes.

OR

Option Two: Upon arrival in Fiji, they can complete 14 days of quarantine at their own cost in a Fijian Government-designated quarantine centre or a hotel of their choosing, after which a negative COVID test can clear them to start their "Bula Bubble" vacation.

This Bula Bubble will allow Aussies and Kiwis to once again enjoy the best of Fiji, while remaining separate from any other travellers and the general public.

To be clear, any tourist who comes to Fiji on these terms still won't be able to move freely throughout the country. All of their movement will be contained within the VIP lanes, starting on the airplane, then from the Nadi Airport onto designated transport to their designated resort or hotel, where they'll remain throughout their stay.

We're currently identifying geographically-isolated resorts that are the best fit for the "Bula Bubble". Fiji Airways, in collaboration with Tourism Fiji and the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport will announce more details in due course.

We're also establishing "Pacific Pathways", starting with all travellers from Tuvalu, Kiribati and Tonga. As the only sovereign nation with a WHO-certified testing lab and the heart of Pacific aviation, Fiji is poised to become a safely-regulated quarantine



The Ministry of Commerce, Trade and Tourism, Fiji Airways and our medical experts are now liaising with governments to allow travellers from Tuvalu, Kiribati and Tonga to fly into Fiji. Upon arrival, they must spend 14 days in Fijian government quarantine facilities and then pass a COVID-19 test to enter society, both at their own cost or the cost of their respective government. As our risk assessments evolve, we may expand this arrangement to Samoa, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

All Pacific Pathway flights will be run by Fiji Airways with adherence to their new “Travel Ready” protocols — that means staff will be wearing masks, health and wellness will be managed by newly established on-board personnel, and planes will be regularly sanitised. Passengers will also be health screened prior to boarding flights — those showing symptoms will not board. Passengers will be screened again on arrival — those showing symptoms will be isolated and tested for the virus.

Fiji Airways has published a detailed framework of every precaution they will be taking before boarding, in-flight, and after landing to minimise any risks; that will also be published on the Fijian Government’s website.

Opening Pacific Pathways isn’t simply about tourism or economic benefit. This is about rekindling the bonds between Pacific people, reconnecting friends, reuniting families and giving the wider world a hopeful glimpse of how we can safely meet again, beyond COVID-19.

Around the world, yachts and pleasure craft are looking to return to Fiji. This is especially true now, with New Zealand currently in the winter season. As those in our hospitality sector know, these ships — particularly super yachts — produce immense economic value for Fiji.

Being alone at sea is a verifiable, self-contained quarantine. That means anyone coming by pleasure craft to Fiji, so long as they haven’t interacted with others, are very low-risk, but their economic impact is very high-reward.

That’s why Fiji will also be establishing safe “blue lanes”, open to those yachts and pleasure craft sailing to Fiji. But the requirements are strict.

Any boat coming to Fiji will be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis. To start, the only port of entry will be Port Denarau Marina. If this pilot project and if successful, we will consider extending blue lanes to other ports and marinas.

Those eligible to sail to Fiji fall under two categories, both of which will require them to be tested in another country before departing.

-If their journey to Fiji will take 14 days or longer uninterrupted at sea, once they dock in Fiji and show proof of a negative test result, everyone on board will be screened by the Ministry of Health for symptoms. If they’re deemed to be healthy, their yacht will be allowed to freely visit other ports throughout Fiji.

-Alternatively, those with a journey at sea shorter than 14 days will be required to make up the difference in quarantine once they dock in Fiji at their own cost. So, say they spend eight days alone at sea — they will then be required to pay for six days



There's already been a great deal of enthusiasm shown for ideas like this one. In fact, interest has been expressed in using the Pacific for travel, maintenance, and stocking in the build up to the 36th America's Cup next year, in which Fiji could be used as a safe "parking lot" until the start of the start of cyclone season.

Cruise ships, meanwhile, are still strictly banned.

We expect New Zealand to soon return to zero-case status and Australia to see more success at containing the spread of the virus.

I want to stress "contained" as the key word here — because as the pandemic rages around the world, until we have a globally-available vaccine, no country can truly claim to be truly "COVID-free" so long as it allows its citizens to return to their home country. Meanwhile, we can aim for the next best thing: absolute containment. So long as those entering Fiji pose no risk to the public at large, we will remain COVID-contained — and we have established a new COVID Risk Mitigation Taskforce to carefully determine which other countries meet the same rigorous standards.

Travellers from countries which earn this status will be allowed to enter Fiji without spending time in quarantine, so long as they present a negative COVID-19 test result within 48 hours of travelling to Fiji.

But let me be clear: as of now, under the rigorous criteria established by our medical experts, which considers key testing metrics, we consider Fiji to be the only COVID-contained country in the Pacific. So for the time being, strict quarantine restrictions and testing requirements will remain for travellers from every country entering Fiji.

If either Australia or New Zealand becomes COVID-contained, the quarantine requirements for travelers from that country will be lifted, and movement can expand beyond these bubbles to everywhere else in Fiji.

We're also granting special consideration for Fijian citizens, Fiji residents and Fiji permit holders currently in Australia and New Zealand to return home to Fiji.

From tomorrow, Monday, the 22nd of June, Fijian citizens and Fiji residents in Australia and New Zealand will be permitted to travel to Fiji only after passing through a net of new safety measures.

These are the options for returning residents and citizens:

One: Intending travellers must present a certificate from a recognised medical institution certifying their 14 days of quarantine in Australia or New Zealand, along with proof of a negative COVID test result within 48 hours of their departure for Fiji.

Once you arrive, you will then spend another seven days in home quarantine in Fiji.

Or, two: if you haven't done your quarantine in Australia or New Zealand but have been tested, you can present a negative COVID-test result within 48 hours of travel and, on arrival to Fiji and spend 14 days in a government-designated quarantine



Regardless if you're a returning Fijian citizen or Fiji resident, and regardless of whether you arrive by air or sea, you must download the careFIJI App to enter the country. If you don't have a smartphone, you can buy one upon landing at Nadi airport for as little as \$100. My advice is simple: if you come to Fiji, bring a smartphone or buy a smartphone and download careFIJI.

Our COVID-19 Risk Mitigation Taskforce will also be considering special requests that promise immense economic value. We're talking about projects that are exceptionally risk-free, but also exceptionally high-reward.

So, say you're a billionaire looking to fly your own jet, rent your own island, and invest millions of dollars in Fiji in the process — if you've taken all the necessary precautions requested by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services and borne all associated costs, you may have a new home to escape the pandemic in paradise.

In recent years, we've established Fiji as something of a "Hollywood of the Pacific", with a film and television industry bringing hundreds of millions of dollars in economic activity, and invaluable exposure to the world. Seeing Fiji's pristine beaches on shows like Survivor or Love Island can be more powerful than any advertisement.

When COVID-19 forced the industry to shut, it wasn't just a blow to the millions of viewers around the world who await these hit shows in anxious anticipation — it was a blow to the hundreds of Fijians who work as crew on set, and the communities that production companies have forged loving relationships with over the years.

But as we return to a "new normal", we're also rekindling hope for Fiji's vital film and television industry. We'll be taking similar steps to New Zealand, who has moved to safely resume production of the sequel to Avatar.

Again, this will be done in a completely safe and controlled manner. Cast and crew won't even be allowed to board their plane without proof of a negative COVID-19 test, and will be screened for symptoms both before boarding and upon landing. They'll then be entered into government-designated quarantine — whether that's a preapproved hotel or a remote isolated island — for the mandatory 14-day period.

Absolutely all quarantine and testing costs will be borne by the production company.

Friends, Fiji — and the Pacific as a whole — is in a coveted position at a consequential moment in history. As a region, we are a pocket of hope in a world devastated by this pandemic. Pacific Islands in particular have the opportunity to set the bar in safely navigating the international community through COVID-19. We have earned the right to be seen on equal footing with our larger regional neighbours.

Australia is working diligently to take control of the virus, while New Zealand is already extremely close to being COVID-contained. Soon, we'll have the chance to make the Pacific's future an inclusive one, defined by revived relationships and safe avenues of economic growth, or one that looks inwards, and deepens inequality.



Fiji is leading in building a COVID-safe economic recovery. But that effort depends on every Fijian watching today, along with everyone they know doing their bit.

By now, you should already have the careFIJI App downloaded onto your phone. If not, download it now. Help us get people back in their jobs, help us restore some measure of normalcy to our lives, help our doctors do their jobs at keeping us safe, and help get Fiji — and the Fijian economy — on the road to recovery.

I'd like to end by extending perhaps the most deserved “vinaka vakalevu” in Fiji’s history to our healthcare heroes.

Vinaka to our contact tracing team, our doctors, nurses, medical staff, and everyone working overtime at the Ministry of Health and Medical Services.

Vinaka to our firefighters who have sanitised buildings, and to our first responders who balanced responding to both COVID-19 and Cyclone Harold.

Vinaka to our disciplined forces, to RFMF for helping us rapidly conduct contact tracing, and to the Police Force for enforcing curfew hours and other directives we put in place to keep Fijians safe and healthy.

Vinaka to our Ministry of Economy team, who quickly put together a COVID-response budget just one week after our first case, and to those at the ministries of Economy, Commerce, Trade, Tourism, Transport and Health and Medical Services — who alongside our private sector partners — helped to establish our COVID-Safe Economic Recovery framework.

Vinaka to our careFIJI app development team from digitalFIJI, who have played a central role in bringing our containment efforts into the future.

Vinaka to leaders of our various private sector partners, including the financial institutions who have worked with the Reserve Bank of Fiji and the Fijian Government, for showing that we can get through any hardship by working together.

Vinaka to every Fijian of every age who visited our fever clinics, washed their hands, practiced physical distancing, and demonstrated the virtues of patience and responsibility in combating this deadly disease.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you for all you’ve done, and will continue to do, to protect Fijian families from this pandemic.

I ask that every Fijian honour their hard work and sacrifice by downloading careFIJI, by continuing to practice the healthy habits that have been at the core of our success, and to keep each other responsible as we adapt to this new normal.

Vinaka vakalevu, thank you, and God bless Fiji.



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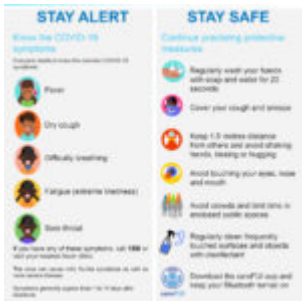
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