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# MINISTRY OF HEALTH & MEDICAL SERVICES



PRESS RELEASE SPEECHES

## Statement By The Minister For Health And Medical Services Hon. Dr. Ifireimi Waqainabete

April 1, 2020 Riaz Hassan Comments Off

Last Updated on 7 months by



## STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND MEDICAL SERVICES HON. DR. IFIREIMI WAQAINABETE

01/04/2020

Bula Vinaka.

After conducting 368 tests —including another 11 last night — Fiji has zero new confirmed cases of the COVID-19 virus. Still, there is zero room for complacency. We may still have five cases, all of whom remain in stable condition, but that shouldn't lead anyone to believe this crisis is behind us. If we relent now, we will cripple our campaign to lock down this virus for good.

Under the leadership of our Honourable Prime Minister, Fiji was quick to ramp up travel restrictions as the virus began its global spread. We shut our borders entirely to foreign nationals present in mainland China and other high-risk countries early on. Passenger travel to Fiji has virtually ended, save for a few planned evacuation flights. Cruise ships are banned. We have a nationwide curfew in effect from 10pm to 5am every day. Schools are closed at least until 17 April. We've rolled out a work from home programme for some civil servants. And, unless travel pertains directly to their lives or livelihoods, all Fijians should stay at home.

As part of nationwide COVID-19 containment effort, following our first case, we locked down the Lautoka confined area on the 19th of March for a period of 14 days. Since that time, three more cases have been identified in the Lautoka confined area, the most recent of which was a 31-year-old member of the first patient's Zumba class.

That patient began displaying symptoms on Tuesday, the 23rd of March. We have since identified and entered all of her close contacts into compulsory self-quarantine — however, there is still a risk she could have infected others. Yes, it's a small risk. But it's a risk we cannot afford to take. If we lift the restrictions too early and we've missed even one person in Lautoka who has contracted the disease, the rest of Viti Levu would be at-risk.

The incubation period for this virus can be as long as 14 days. That is why, out of an abundance of caution, the Lautoka confined area will remain locked down at least until 5am in the morning on Tuesday, the 7th of April. By that time, if we are confident that we have flushed out the virus, the restrictions may be relaxed. As you know in the past few days we have opened the port in Lautoka for international shipping, including exports and imports. Of course, we will continue to allow steady flows of essential food, goods and services to come into and out of Lautoka in a controlled and hygienic fashion.

We know these restrictions have not been easy for many residents within the Lautoka confined area. But take comfort knowing that these tough decisions we're making could very well spare us enormous future suffering. Nobody wants to see a large-scale outbreak of this virus in Fiji — and that means making hard calls today that keep this virus at bay. While this lockdown continues, we are re-doubling our efforts to ensure this virus has not spread further. Our teams in the Lautoka confined area are going to test and test and test until we *know* this virus has been contained.

The extension of the lockdown means the same rules remain: No one in and no one out. We know that some Lautoka residents have been caught outside of the Lautoka confined area. We know this has not been an easy two weeks for these Fijians. I want to thank those living outside the Lautoka confined area who are opening their homes to friends, family and even just their fellow Fijians during the lockdown. But know that these measures have been put in place to keep you safe, and keep your friends and family within the confined area safe as well.

At the present time, in the interest of keeping everyone safe, we cannot allow anyone back into the confined area. I'll tell you why: Our investigations revealed serious gaps in the account provided by the first patient about when his symptoms actually began. It's clear we cannot trust everything he has said. Even though we've now successfully accounted for all of his known contacts, it is in the nation's best interest that we all act as if there are still more cases in the area waiting to be detected, and even in the surrounding areas, such as Nadi, until we know with certainty that there are not. On top of that, we cannot disregard the possibility that the recent patient — the man who recently travelled to Fiji prior to testing positive while in New Zealand — may have picked up the virus while he was here.

To those living within the Lautoka confined area, know that the single quickest way to open up your boundaries and return to normal is by seeing as many people in the Lautoka confined area as possible tested for fevers at our new clinics. To be blunt, the low number of Fijians visiting these fever clinics in the Lautoka confined area has, so far, been severely disappointing, and this lack of action only holds up our efforts. So, if you're showing any symptoms — like a sore throat, cough, or fever — please, go get yourself tested. If teams visit your home, be honest about how you are feeling and who you have seen. It is your God-given responsibility to your family, your community, and your country.

We also know many families have been anxious about what this virus — and the accompanying global recession — will mean for their livelihoods. In our COVID-19 response budget, the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy unveiled a historic package of support to Fijian businesses, employees and families, along with a 40 million-dollar injection directly into our healthcare systems; a big financial boost that I — along with our frontline health workers — deeply appreciate.

Ladies and gentlemen, That passage of that budget included a new amendment to the Public Health Act to step up our enforcement of the measures we've introduced to keep the Fijian people safe; because we are not relying on goodwill alone to do what must be done to stop this virus from spiralling into an outbreak. The police have already made dozens of arrests relating to violations of our health protection measures and — through an amendment to the Public Health Act — liars and law-breakers can face up to five years in prison, a ten thousand dollar fine, or both.

But despite some of the reckless actions and attitudes we've seen, we know many Fijians *have* been playing by the rules. In fact, many have gone above and beyond the call of duty in the campaign against the coronavirus. I want to thank the businesses who are putting physical distancing into practice for their employees and customers. I want to thank the concerned citizens who have reported irresponsible behaviour to the police. I especially want to thank the doctors and the nurses who spend every day on the frontlines, identifying, containing and treating this virus and keeping us safe.

And I want to thank everyone who realises that the government cannot secure victory over this virus alone. We are in a fight for the lives of our most vulnerable, and we need the vigilance, discipline and genuine compassion of every single Fijian to win it.

We need everyone washing their hands with soap and water as often as they can. We need everyone maintaining a two-metre safe distance from others as much as possible; that means queuing responsibly no matter what you're waiting for, and staying at home as often as possible. We need everyone to drop the stigma around being tested, whether that's for the common fever,

flu, or COVID-19 — because, despite them sharing some symptoms, distinguishing between coronavirus and other viral infections is critical to saving lives. If you have a cough, fever, sore throat or shortness of breath and have been overseas or been in contact with someone who has been overseas, call the Ministry of Health on toll-free number 158 immediately.

No expert can say with certainty how long this global crisis will last. But what we do know is that we don't stand a chance at snuffing out this virus unless every Fijian gets behind the government's plan and does their part in winning the war on COVID-19. So, do your part.

Do it for yourself, do it for those you love, do it for Fiji.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you. God Bless Fiji.

**Riaz Hassan**

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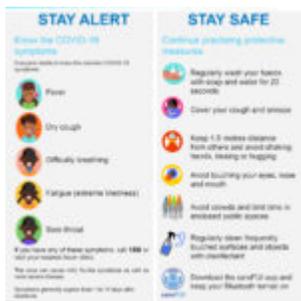
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