

***Date: 25 August 2020***

**Statement by Acting Permanent Secretary for Health and Medical Services, Dr James Fong on latest Border Case Death and COVID-Safe Amendments**

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**Bula Vinaka and Good Afternoon**

We all know the impacts of COVID-19 stretch far beyond the health sector alone. Our response requires a whole-of-government approach — particularly when it comes to Fiji's economic recovery. That's why I'm here today alongside representatives from our COVID-19 Risk Mitigation Taskforce.

Our full CRMT team consists of the Permanent Secretary for Economy, myself, the Acting Permanent Secretary for Health and Medical Services, and the Permanent Secretary for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport. We've also been working closely with other co-opted members of the taskforce, including the Permanent Secretary for Immigration, the Health Protection team, the Incident Management Team, and the Republic of Fiji Military Forces Surveillance team.

**COVID-related Fatality**

As we have previously announced, we have securely confirmed border quarantine cases of COVID-19 among our citizens who are returning from overseas. These cases have not represented a risk to the public. Under the watchful eye of our disciplined forces, Fiji's border is sealed, and the virus has not re-entered our communities.

However, I'm sad to report that another of these patients, a 61-year-old man, has passed away due to complications of COVID-19. The gentleman contracted the virus while in the United States. He arrived to Fiji from Sacramento, California on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August, where he was immediately entered into quarantine.

He developed symptoms of COVID-19 shortly after entering border quarantine and was transferred to the isolation unit at Nadi Hospital. When his condition worsened he was transferred to the isolation unit at Lautoka hospital for specialized care. Despite the best efforts of our healthcare professionals he sadly passed away last night at the Lautoka Hospital Intensive Care Unit.

We at the Ministry of Health and Medical Services extend our deepest sympathies to his friends and family. We feel this loss across the Ministry, and his treating nurses and physicians mourn his passing most acutely. But we all take some solace in the fact that

this gentleman was able to return to Fiji, and it is here he can be laid to rest — in Fiji, his home.

Our Lautoka hospital colleagues have worked with the gentleman's family to ensure funeral arrangements adhere to the necessary infection prevention and control protocols.

We had delayed announcement of this second fatality until the afternoon out of respect for the family's wishes, as they requested that they be able to first hold this gentleman's burial before they were thrust into the national spotlight. So, we were all shocked when the Fiji Sun jumped the gun with their report of his passing, even after we had specifically expressed to them to hold off for the sake of this gentleman's loved ones.

We are deeply disappointed with the Fiji Sun's lack of ethics in this instance. No media organisation should let moral imperatives be overridden by the insatiable desire to "be first" in their reporting. These are sensitive issues that demand decency from all of us — and it's shameful that the Fiji Sun is more focussed on making headlines than on granting this family the privacy to mourn their loss.

In fact, it is more than just indecent. Such reckless reporting puts unfounded fear in our people's hearts, as they learn of a fatality from this deadly virus without any of the proper context provided.

We hope never to see such irresponsibility repeated.

## **COVID-Contained**

I want to assure every Fijian watching that this latest fatality — while tragic — does not pose a risk to the public. It has now been 129 days since Fiji has recorded a new case of COVID-19 in our communities. We aim to maintain that unbroken streak. All health staff directly involved with the care of this patient have adhered to strict infection prevention and control protocols. Each will undergo quarantine in a government designated facility and must clear a negative COVID test result to be released.

As confirmed by our continual testing at the border and among the Fijian public, we are now one of the few countries — if not **the** only country — in the world to contend with an outbreak of the virus, contain that outbreak, and then go more than 100 days without a resurgence.

With over 23 million confirmed cases and 800,000 deaths from COVID-19 confirmed around the world, no one should take Fiji's COVID-Contained status for granted. In our

own neighbourhood, Australia — and now New Zealand — are both contending with new outbreaks of the virus, as are Papua New Guinea and French Polynesia.

In New Zealand's case, given how effectively they stamped out their initial outbreak, their latest cluster of cases came as a surprise to all of us. But we are confident our Kiwi partners will act with the same decisiveness that served them so well in the past. We applaud New Zealand's recent move to implement managed isolation for confirmed patients and mobilise the New Zealand Defence Force to enhance border security — Fiji can attest these measures work.

New Zealand's experience goes to show that Fijians cannot become complacent — nor have we been. We have continued to test regularly for the virus in our communities and among our healthcare workers. All those tests have returned negative. Our testing positivity rate — the single most important metric — ranks among the lowest in the world at 0.4%.

### **Gathering up to 50% Capacity**

On the technical side, we've been conducting exhaustive reviews of the guidelines within our Fijian COVID-Safe Economic Recovery Framework.

We've said from the start this a flexible framework that will evolve alongside our constantly changing global and local environment. Today, we're announcing some amendments to Phase 2 of our COVID-Safe Economic Framework. These are mainly for the sake of consistency.

As per our last announcement, all gatherings are limited to 100 people. We're amending that restriction, allowing for houses of worship, restaurants, cafes, entertainment venues, such as gaming centres, bars, pubs and conferences and meeting venues, swimming pools, common areas in boarding facilities, including weddings, funerals and other community gatherings to function at 50% capacity.

So, if a venue has a capacity for 500 people, it can now host up to 250 people. However, if a venue capacity is less than 200, it can continue to host events with 100 people or less. This applies to both indoor and outdoor facilities.

Up until now, we've been using the 50% capacity thresholds for sports stadiums. Just like with athletic events, these measures only work well when all Fijians take COVID Safe precautions.

That means we must maintain physical distance of 1.5 metres as much as possible; avoid shaking hands, kissing and hugging; queue responsibly; wash our hands frequently with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitiser; cough or sneeze into a tissue or the bend of our elbows; and stay home if you're feeling unwell.

Lastly — and this is critically important — please download the careFIJI contact tracing application. If you are organising an event, make sure everyone attending the event has careFIJI installed with the Bluetooth switched on. Seriously, when someone arrives, they should show that they have careFIJI on their phone. If not, they must manually sign in with someone at the front — no exceptions.

We understand some nightclubs have sought to obtain a new business designation as taverns in the interest of re-opening their businesses. We fully appreciate that nightclub owners have seen a severe impact to their bottom-line due to our health restrictions — but the reality is these businesses represent the highest-risk environments for the potential spread of the virus.

Moving forward, any requests from nightclubs to seek new business designations will be approved on a case-by-case basis, with compulsory input from the Ministry of Health. Our teams need to ensure these venues can operate in a COVID-safe manner before any new designation can be considered and they can re-open their doors.

### **Returning Diplomats and Permit Holders**

Globally, countries have introduced protocols for diplomatic travel. Fiji has allowed diplomats to return to Fiji on a case-by-case basis and we will continue to do so.

Valid permit holders may also be permitted to return to Fiji on a case-by-case basis. We are also selectively granting new permits on a case-by-case basis for individuals who possess specialised skills that aid Fiji's COVID-safe economic recovery. Existing and new permit holders must apply to the Permanent Secretary for Immigration to enter Fiji.

All applications for returning diplomats and permit holders — old and new — are subject to vetting by the Ministry of Health.

Travel arrangements for all travellers entering Fiji are designed entirely around preserving public health and wellbeing. All individuals must clear a negative test result for the virus before boarding their flight — something we call a pre-departure test. That test result must be reviewed and approved by the Ministry of Health before the traveller departs for Fiji. Some may be required to test again upon arrival based on assessment of risk by the

Ministry of Health. These individuals must then spend at least 14 days in a government-designated quarantine facility. After the quarantine period, individuals must clear another negative COVID test result — something we call a border quarantine exit test — before entering the country.

Non-citizens will be required to bear all costs related to quarantine and testing. Our entry and testing requirements are detailed on the Fijian Government’s website.

## **High – End Tourism**

As we’ve said before, we understand this pandemic’s economic impacts, such as joblessness, can be just as dangerous as the direct health impacts of COVID-19. As recently stated by the Director General of the World Health Organisation “We do not need to choose between lives and livelihoods, or between health and the economy. That’s a false choice. On the contrary, the pandemic is a reminder that health and the economy are inseparable”.

## **Blue Lanes**

Our Blue lanes initiative continues to operate safely and successfully. As of yesterday, 66 yachts have been approved under this initiative, with more yachts and superyachts on the way. To ensure superyachts can function properly, we’re allowing for crew changes. That means crew are being flown in to Fiji to join superyachts, allowing these vessels to be properly run and maintained for months at sea in Fiji.

Again, the requirements for entry into Fiji are strict. All crew must clear a pre-departure test, spend 14 days in quarantine, and then clear a border quarantine exit test.

## **Bula Bubble**

We previously announced that travellers from Australia and New Zealand would be allowed to board flights to Fiji through two pathways. One, they could spend 14 days of quarantine in their home country, clear a negative COVID test and arrive in Fiji. Or they could clear a negative COVID test, spend 14 days of quarantine in a Fijian Government quarantine facility, and then embark through our VIP lanes to one of our specially designated resorts to begin their Bula Bubble vacation.

Unfortunately, due to new outbreaks of COVID-19, the Australian and New Zealand governments cannot certify home quarantine for potential travellers to Fiji, so we’ve closed that pathway for the time being. Otherwise, the Bula Bubble will continue to

function as designed, as the second pathway remains open. All incoming travellers must conduct a pre-departure test, spend their 14 days in a Fijian Government-quarantine facility, and then clear a border quarantine test to begin their vacation.

### **Replication of Quarantine Conditions**

Again, no one who arrives to Fiji is exempt from 14 days of quarantine and no one can enter Fijian society unless they clear a negative test result for COVID-19. Our health personnel and disciplined forces do have the capacity to make arrangements for alternative quarantine sites. However, the individual must bear the costs of their off-site supervision by members of our disciplined forces.

### **Conclusion**

Our COVID-Safe Economic Recovery Framework was designed to be adaptable to the realities of the “new normal” and we fully expect more amendments moving forward. Throughout that ongoing review, every Fijian can trust that every one of our decisions are based on science and in line with best global practices.

To maintain Fiji’s COVID-Contained status, our vigilance is the only vaccine available to us. And we must all remain vigilant at all times. As always, we urge you to wash your hands, maintain physical distance where possible and install the careFIJI digital contact tracing application.

Thank you.