

COVID-19 surges in Solomon Islands

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COVID-19 infections have now been detected in seven out of the eight provinces in the South Pacific country of Solomon Islands.

The unchecked spread of the coronavirus throughout the impoverished country threatens an escalation of the health crisis. Many of the provinces now affected lack all but the most basic healthcare infrastructure and personnel.

Solomon Islands had been among the few countries to have avoided COVID community transmission. The island state's isolation, low population (700,000), and strict border controls prevented coronavirus incursions until early January this year. Infected people then crossed the ocean border from Papua New Guinea and transmission quickly escalated in the country's capital, Honiara, before spreading to the provinces.

According to the *Our World in Data* website, as of March 18 a total of 9,851 cases have been detected across the country.

This is a significant underestimate of the actual spread of the virus. Testing capacity, as with every aspect of COVID-19 response infrastructure, is grossly inadequate. The Associated Press reported on February 17 that health authorities believed as many as one in two of Honiara's 80,000 residents had symptoms consistent with COVID-19, though there were also flu and cold viruses circulating.

The very limited healthcare preparations that had been put in place before the outbreak quickly broke down. An absence of basic personal protective equipment (PPE) in Honiara's National Referral Hospital (NRH) saw more than 100 medical staff contract COVID before February.

The *Guardian* on February 22 published anonymous reports from a senior doctor and two nurses at the hospital. At that point there were "no beds for COVID patients—leading to people dying on the floor of the wards—as well as a lack of facilities and staff shortages

that have led to COVID-positive nurses being recalled to work and probationary nurses tending to critically ill patients solo, when they should be supervised by a more senior nurse."

The senior doctor said: "People are dying on the floor, the hospital is overcrowded ... Sick people and dead bodies were all over. The morgue is full. It's a sad experience. I have never seen this before."

Confirmed deaths from COVID-19 now stand at 127. According to *Our World in Data*, less than one-third of the population have received a single dose of vaccine, and only 14 percent two doses.

The crisis has now spilled into the outer rural areas of the country. In the remote southern Rennell and Bellona province, testing only began on February 28, reportedly a fortnight after residents complained of growing numbers of people afflicted by COVID symptoms.

The *Island Sun* reported on March 10 that of the 61 tests carried out by that point, 41 were positive, that is 67 percent. "The results pointed to a very high transmission of the virus on Bellona and this is very worrying," Dr Yogesh Choudhri, technical advisor to the Ministry of Health, told the newspaper.

As in other provinces, there are no isolation facilities on Bellona, and affected residents are asked to self-isolate in their homes.

Outside of Honiara, Solomon Islands' most populous province of Malaita is the worst affected. It has registered 994 cases, again with the real infection level much higher. Twenty-two deaths have been recorded on the island, with another four patients in critical condition.

Also badly affected is Western Province. The towns and villages of Gizo, Noro, Munda and Seghe were locked down for three days at the beginning of the month, in response to escalating infections. Only essential services and work was permitted.

Widespread poverty in Solomon Islands, combined with inadequate government services and emergency support, has inflicted significant hardships on the population amid the pandemic.

Those infected are required to self-isolate at home, but there is no financial assistance provided to offset loss of income. The chairperson of Western Province's disaster operation committee, Jeffrey Wickham, told the *Island Sun* on March 10: "I'm concerned about the welfare of families who are undergoing home quarantine. All potential sources to get funding in the province have been exhausted and now we are also running behind time in our operation."

On March 18, the *Island Sun* reported that many residents in Western Province's largest town of Gizo were avoiding being tested, "because if they are positive they will have to be isolated and go hungry during their quarantine period."

Food shortages have been reported in Shortlands, Western Province. On March 9, a group of residents staged a demonstration outside the Harapa Police Station. The *Solomon Star* reported that "they displayed written slogans demanding their leaders and government to address their concerns regarding the need to provide services and support their livelihood through food."

The pandemic is heightening social tensions across Solomon Islands. Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare last month delivered a speech warning that the limited lockdown measures enacted had cost the government millions of dollars in lost revenues. Next month will see the delivery of an annual budget reportedly including far reaching austerity measures.

The *Solomon Star*, citing anonymous sources, reported that this will include slashed annual leave entitlements for public sector workers, including for low level public servants currently paid just \$300 Solomon Islands' dollars (\$50 Australian) a week.

Australian imperialism, long the US-backed dominant power in the South Pacific, has provided only limited aid in response to the economic and humanitarian crisis in Solomon Islands.

Inadequate supplies of vaccines, testing equipment, and medical provisions have been sent, and air force food drops have been organised for some of the affected provinces. This is driven not by any concern for the plight of ordinary people in Solomon Islands,

but rather by geo-strategic calculations, above all the fear of being perceived as less active than China.

Honiara switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019, triggering outrage and alarm in Washington and Canberra. American officials regarded this sovereign decision as a blow to their efforts to isolate and undermine Beijing. The Sogavare government has been in US imperialism's crosshairs ever since. Concerns have only grown as Honiara and Beijing have collaborated on security issues—Chinese police advisors are currently working in the Solomons with local police—with a potential military partnership the greatest US-Australian fear.

Last November, US-funded and supported Malaitan separatists staged a violent though unsuccessful coup attempt.

Tensions remain high however, and the Biden administration announced last month that it is going to upgrade its consulate in Honiara to an embassy. This will see a significant expansion within Solomon Islands of the US corps of State Department and intelligence agency operatives, raising the spectre of a stepped up "regime change" drive.



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