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**Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Sugar Industry**

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## Statement on COVID-19

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Bula Vinaka.

I'd like to thank the Minister for Health Dr. Ifereimi Waqainabete, the Country Director of the World Health Organisation, Dr Corinne Capuano, and Doctor James Fong, General Manager of the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 Incident Management Team for joining me today as we continue to keep Fijians both healthy and well-informed.

The COVID-19 global outbreak has recently been declared a pandemic by the WHO, and our teams have been reviewing the situation on an hourly basis. The virus is now present in the majority of nations and territories on Earth, with over 140,000 cases confirmed.

As of 5pm today, Fiji does not have a confirmed case of COVID-19. We should all be grateful for the diligence and vigilance of those on the ground working to buy us vital time to prepare. We must take advantage of this precious time we have been blessed with by acting *now* to reduce the chance of this virus spreading when it arrives in Fiji.

Our travel restrictions on Italy, Iran, South Korea and mainland China remain in full effect, as do the stringent screening measures at our international airports. We plan to install thermal scanners at our international airports. From tomorrow, cruise ships will be banned from berthing anywhere in Fiji.

Also from tomorrow, international events will not be allowed in Fiji and local events will be closed to all guests coming in from overseas.

Ministers, civil servants, Permanent Secretaries and staff of statutory bodies will be restricted from travelling overseas barring exceptionally critical circumstances.

We also highly discourage all Fijians from travelling overseas. If you do choose to travel anywhere outside of Fiji, you may be required to self-isolate for 14 days upon your return to Fiji, even if you are not displaying symptoms of COVID-19. This, of course, is already mandated for Fijians arriving home from nations on our restricted travel list.

These measures will all be subject to review as the global situation evolves.

We already have secure isolation facilities up and running throughout Fiji, with the Central Division being served by Navua Hospital, the Western Division served by the Nadi Hospital, and Labasa Hospital serving the Northern Division. As we monitor the situation, more isolation units will be established as the need arises in accordance with our expansion plan.

As of the 15th of March at 5pm, Fiji remains coronavirus-free — and it is on that basis that we've developed these measures. If and when we see our first case, far more stringent measures will immediately come into effect to aggressively prevent the spread of the disease, as other nations have done, such as bans on local gatherings.

While we may not yet have a case, now is the time to begin changing the ways we go about our day-to-day lives to strengthen our resilience to an outbreak.

The single most important thing anyone can do is to wash your hands with soap and water on a regular basis. The combination of soap and water kills COVID-19 dead in its tracks. I'm asking everyone watching to help me carry that message to every man, woman and child in Fiji. A thorough and effective handwashing takes 20 seconds — and with this simple act, you may very well be saving a life. We'll also need to break the habit of shaking hands, hugging and sharing takis and bilos. Instead, simply share a “bula” from a safe distance and limit in-person contact as much as possible.

This isn't just about protecting yourself, this is about responsibility — your responsibility to the well-being of the countless Fijians who you cross paths with every day. Do it to protect the elderly woman you walk by at the market, the man with a pre-existing heart condition who rides the bus with you, or the grandparent who you look after.

While the steps we can take as individuals are critical, to be effective, the preparations for COVID-19 must be society-wide. We need everyone aware of the risks and actively participating in our nationwide response.

Because the sobering reality is that, while we have yet to see a case in our country, our population is already vulnerable to coronavirus. Those with preexisting conditions and NCDs — like diabetes, heart disease, and cancer — are at a higher risk of death by COVID-19. So, I encourage all Fijians to use this moment to make lasting lifestyle changes to improve your health — by doing so, you are guarding yourself and those you love from communicable viruses, like COVID-19, and non-communicable disease alike.

To maximise our larger prevention and containment efforts, we'll continue to work closely with our hotel and tourism partners to help identify, isolate and treat any visitors who may be experiencing symptoms of the virus.

With our flows of tourism under close supervision, we will continue supporting the tens of thousands of Fijian families who depend on the tourism sector for their livelihoods.

As we work hand-in-hand with our tourism operators and other business leaders to combat the coronavirus, we hear their very serious worries about the impact the situation will have on their business. As the outbreak worsens and travel restrictions heighten, people are travelling less. Supply chains as well are seeing major disruptions. As a result, many nations of all sizes will likely see their economies contract.

This is not a time for panic, but a time for prudence. We've already made a number of critical unbudgeted expenditures to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. But it's clear we need to reassess our spending priorities for the remainder of the financial year.

The Attorney-General and Minister for Economy will announce a COVID-19 Response Budget on the 26th of March – where we'll lay out our financial game plan for protecting our people and supporting Fijian businesses and livelihoods through what will undoubtedly be a difficult period. Ahead of that response budget, he'll be sitting down with the FNPF and banks to discuss ways to mitigate the impact the COVID-19 global economic slowdown is having – and will continue to have – on individual Fijian workers and their families.

Let's remember, when it comes to our people's wellbeing, our economic security and the preservation of our way of life, we are all in this together. Do not politicise this pandemic. Do not stigmatise or discriminate against any of your fellow citizens. Do not sensationalise information. Do not spread fake news at the expense of public health, the economy and the jobs and livelihoods of our people.



We are one team, united in one, common mission to keep Fiji strong, safe and healthy. Do your part by washing your hands and covering your mouth and nose if you cough or sneeze. If you are feeling unwell, or know someone who is feeling unwell, immediately contact the Health Ministry on one of these numbers:

In the Central Division call 2219905;

In the Eastern Division call 2219906;

In the Western Division call 2219907; and

In the Northern Division call 2219908.

As always, all of us should rely only on the Ministry of Health and Medical Services and the World Health Organisation as trusted sources of information.

We will regularly update the public with the best information available and take whatever measures are necessary to ensure that the wellbeing and safety of every Fijian always comes first.

Vinaka and God Bless.