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STATEMENT ON COVID-19

Bula Vinaka.

Once again, I'm joining you after a comprehensive update from our medical experts, along with the World Health Organization, on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Globally, there are now over 414,000 confirmed cases in 194 countries and territories. Hundreds are dying every day. We're seeing a troubling trend of a 10% day-over-day increase in total cases — indicating the worst of the spread is yet to come.

As you all know, Fiji confirmed our first COVID-19 case last week on the 19th of March 2020. Our first patient, along with the three others diagnosed since, are all in stable condition. All four remain safely isolated from the public.

With every case of the virus, our contact tracing team has been aggressively identifying, quarantining and testing every person who came into contact with any of the confirmed COVID-19 patients.

That team quickly determined that our first patient — the flight attendant from Lautoka — attended a Zumba class while he was displaying symptoms. All members of that class were directed to self-quarantine the same day our first patient was diagnosed, the 19th of March. They were each instructed to immediately alert our medical teams if they began developing symptoms.

Yesterday, four days into compulsory self-quarantine, one of the class members, a 31-year-old woman, began displaying symptoms. During their Zumba class, she worked out in close proximity with the first patient and shared a hug. When she later recognised her symptoms, she notified our rapid response medical teams, who securely and hygienically transported her via ambulance to the isolation ward at Lautoka Hospital. She was tested. Early this morning, she was confirmed as Fiji's fifth case of COVID-19.

Once again, we're lucky that this patient was in quarantine when her symptoms first developed. She shares a household with nine others — two of whom were also showing symptoms and have been isolated in Lautoka Hospital. The other seven remain under strict quarantine in the home, which is under constant police surveillance.

For anyone out there still asking why we've had to shut down the Lautoka confined area, this case is exactly why. We knew there was a risk that our first patient may have spread the virus to others. That is why we did not hesitate in shutting down movement into and out of the Lautoka confined area. No one in and no one out. If we hadn't done so, this new patient could have traveled to other parts of Fiji, potentially exposing others and vastly complicating our contact tracing efforts.

As for the case we identified yesterday — the young man who caught the virus in Sydney — we don't have any major updates. He is in isolation at Navua Hospital, in stable condition, as are all of the other members of his household.

Now I need to take a moment to give all Fijians a hard lesson in honesty and responsibility.

As we know, our first patient was a flight attendant in Lautoka. According to his first statement, he only began showing symptoms a day before he was admitted to hospital.

Our subsequent investigations revealed that unfortunately, we weren't given the full story. Witnesses tell us he had been showing symptoms, including coughing, days prior and that he failed to place himself in self-quarantine. So, our contact tracing had to be extended further back to identify even more people he may have contacted and get them into quarantine as well.

This is water under the bridge; none of us should waste time targeting or vilifying our first patient — we all have much more important work to focus on. Most of the individuals we've had to contact have been placed in compulsory self-quarantine. However, there are still six individuals, all in the Western Division, who have yet to come forward. The updated list of these names is again posted on the Ministry of Health's Facebook page.

This goes to show two things: Number one, the measures restricting travel out of the Lautoka confined area remain vital. Those measures will remain in effect for at least the next eight days depending on the outcomes of our contact tracing. We won't hesitate to extend those restrictions if necessary.

Number two, every Fijian needs to tell the truth to our health officials. If you lie, you could cost people their very lives. Be honest with our doctors, nurses, police officers, and medical teams about where you've been, who you have seen and, if you're unwell, tell them exactly when you started feeling sick. Help them help you, and help Fiji beat this virus. By being dishonest, you aren't protecting your loved ones from isolation; you are putting their lives in danger, and you risk infecting many more. Ask yourself: Would you rather them be in isolation for a couple of weeks, or lose them forever?

The answer to that question is obvious. But some people still don't seem to get what is at stake here. Our police are actively investigating reports that 36 Fiji Airways flight attendants have blatantly violated their self-quarantine, sharing grog and interacting with their friends and caregivers from outside the quarantine area.

To those not following our instructions, I have to ask: Is this a joke to you? What in God's name are you thinking? While Fijians in Lautoka are living under a lockdown, while our health workers work day and night to test and treat patients, and while the elderly are restricted to their homes, these Fijians are spitting on all of the sacrifices their fellow Fijians are making to keep our country safe.

Self-quarantine isn't a voluntary measure. It's not simply a "nice thing to do". It is a compulsory, legally-mandated order. And these Fijians will be investigated. If necessary, they will be arrested, charged and punished accordingly. So, if you have been directed to self-quarantine and you're hearing this message, ask yourself: Where would you rather be? Quarantined in the comfort of your home for 14 days, or in prison for violating the law?

In Fiji, being a flight attendant is a highly-competitive job — hundreds, if not thousands, of Fijians strive for each position filled. It should be a position you hold with pride, and one you don't take for granted. Because I can say that if irresponsible behaviour like this continues, Fiji Airways should not hesitate to clean house and replace you with people who take their duty of care seriously. Your behaviour in-flight, and the protective measures that you take to ensure the safety of your cabin, should be no different than they are on the ground when you're caring for your own community.

If we hadn't been alerted of this breach, and even one of these flight attendants had COVID-19 — who then shared a bilo with 35 others, who were then in contact with others still from outside of quarantine — the situation could quickly spiral out of control. Let's assume they infected three others, just like our first patient. Let's then assume those three people each infected three more, and each day, that number multiplied. In a matter of days, hundreds would be infected. In a matter of about one week, we'd be talking thousands of cases.

This is precisely the path we've seen other countries who failed to take this virus seriously from the start. In Italy, they have one of the most developed healthcare systems in the world, but they're up to nearly 7,000 deaths. There are heartbreaking stories of doctors being forced to choose between patients based on their age; knowing that they don't have enough resources to save every patient, especially the elderly and vulnerable. If you have a moment, go online, find a video of an Italian hospital and you'll see exactly what I'm talking about.

In Fiji, we're working overtime to avoid that nightmare scenario. We are quickly acquiring new beds and ventilators, and taking other measures that will be announced by our Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy in tomorrow's supplementary budget address. But the fact is, if what happened in Italy happens in Fiji, our healthcare system would buckle. The grim reality is that in Fiji, the number of deaths for this many cases would likely be much, much higher.

Globally, some countries are combating this virus more effectively than others. South Korea has shown exemplary viral management. The name of the game for the South Koreans is this: Efficient testing, efficient tracing, travel bans, efficient isolating and efficient quarantining. We're adhering to those same steps — with a focus on efficiency — to keep this situation under control here in Fiji.

But even with all of our officers, doctors, nurses and experts, we cannot succeed without the aid of every Fijian. I'm going to keep saying this until everyone gets it: Fiji is at war with the coronavirus. We cannot see our enemy. But we must act as if the enemy is in our midst at all times. You can join the fight by washing your hands with soap and water, practicing physical distancing — remember, two metres' distance is safest — and following any and every directive given to you by authorities. And if you're told to quarantine, do it. Do it, or we'll make you do it.

Today certainly merited a scolding, but it also merits a big vinaka to those Nadi residents who have shown the best of Fiji by reporting these issues as soon as they came to light. Anyone else who sees anything amounting to a violation of our health protection measures should call the police immediately.

Fiji now has two cases imported from overseas. From tomorrow, Nadi Airport will be officially shut down to all scheduled passenger travel. There are currently three flights inbound to Fiji carrying Fijians returning home from overseas, these passengers will all be required to self-quarantine for 14 days upon arrival.

We know there are still some Fijians overseas seeking to come home. We're exploring safe, low-risk evacuation measures to get these folks home. We're also working closely with embassies here in Fiji to repatriate foreign nationals still on our shores and get them home as well.

We're seriously concerned about the virus ever reaching any of our outer island communities. From this Sunday, the 29th of March, all passenger travel to our outer islands will cease. Shipping lines for freight will continue — with increased bulk but decreased frequency — to ensure food and other essential goods are supplied across our islands. Anyone who regularly travels these routes should decide over the next four days where they'd prefer to spend the next few months.

Our ban on gatherings of 20 or more people remains in effect. I want to make sure every Fijian knows that, if you have a death in the family, you can proceed with a burial, so long as you limit any gatherings to fewer than 20 people.

Given the number of Fijians in isolation and under compulsory self-quarantine, it is likely we'll confirm more cases in the near future. That is why it's vital everyone, everywhere in Fiji, continues to avoid all non-essential travel. Children should stay at home. The elderly should stay at home. For everyone else, outside of going to work, buying food, medicine or essential goods, getting money or accessing a life-sustaining service, do not leave the house.

My fellow Fijians, the average age of our five confirmed COVID-19 patients in Fiji is 27 years old. Let that go to show, none of us are immune. Though some age groups will see more deadly effects, all of us can catch the virus and pass it on to others; all of us must act to prevent ourselves from becoming carriers. All it can take is one person — one single person of any age — to make bad decisions while carrying the virus, and suddenly this outbreak is out of control.

As I said yesterday: Be diligent. Be compassionate. And put those values into practice in everything you do.

If you, or someone you've had contact with, has recently travelled overseas and you are experiencing the symptoms of COVID-19 — even if those symptoms are as mild as a sore throat or cough — immediately call the following 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.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you, and God bless Fiji.