

Bula Vinaka.

As announced by the Hon PM this morning, on Saturday we detected a positive case of the virus in a member of our security forces who was working in a border quarantine facility.

The soldier in question tested negative for the virus during routine testing for border staff on the 10th of April 2021. Despite showing no symptoms, he was tested again on the 17th of April in line with our border quarantine procedures. That was when the positive result was registered. We suspect he contracted the virus from two Fijian citizens who returned to Fiji from India on the 10th of April. They both tested positive for the virus and were transported to the isolation ward of Lautoka Hospital on the Friday the 16th of April. So, we are dealing with a transmission window from one to six days. The soldier was staying onsite at the quarantine facility, as is the protocol for all our military personnel on rotation through border quarantine duties. He is reported to not have left the site at any time during the transmission window. However, given that the potential window for transmission may be prolonged, we have to assume that the soldier had some contact with daytime staff of the quarantine facility, including hotel workers. These are staff who have gone on to enter public spaces.

So, while this is still a border quarantine case, there is a serious risk that cases could have entered the community. That is why we are acting with decisive precaution to prevent any widespread transmission from this case. For us, this level of extreme precaution is the benchmark for keeping our people safe.

From last night, we have embarked on a contact tracing effort to identify those who came into contact with this individual as well as members of their households.

We have identified 69 first generation contacts. These are individuals who were working in the quarantine facility during the window of transmission – and while they may not all be close contacts of this case, we have deliberately widened our definition of a first generation contact to cast a wide net out of an abundance of caution. These individuals are all now in quarantine facilities, where they will be quarantined for 14 days. So far, 56 have tested negative for the virus. 13 results are still being processed.

We have identified and contained, 267 second generation contacts. These are individuals sharing a household with the first generation contacts of our index case. These individuals were also taken into quarantine facilities last night and are being tested. We should have the results starting from tomorrow.

As these results come in, we will have a clear idea about whether our contact tracing needs to expand. As of today, we are comfortable with the net we've cast.

Right now, our priority is obtaining the clearest picture possible about the potential length of this chain of transmission. The Prime Minister has discouraged people from non-essential travel and

gatherings. We expect to update the public on any new health restrictions in line with that announcement tomorrow depending on the results of the tests that come in.

This soldier in question had already received one dose of his COVID-19 vaccine. We know that offers some level of protection. However, we cannot say with certainty whether or not this has limited his transmission of the virus to others, even though global data does suggest that viral transmission is reduced even after one dose.

What we can say is that this individual did not violate protocol. He was wearing the proper PPE and never left the facility to enter the public. His interaction with the daytime staff of the quarantine facility was in keeping with our protocols however given the potentially wide transmission period we have to spread our contact tracing net wide and early. Fiji's security protocols have done exceptionally at keeping us safe, and we'll use this opportunity to strengthen them further, particularly to prevent the spread of new, more contagious variants.

We have always said that our containment of COVID-19 has depended on the commendable efforts of our frontline border staff, but none of us should become complacent. As multiple border breaches in other countries has shown, as long as this virus is out there in the world, we will remain at risk. Actually, this incident is a test of our next level of containment – which is the ability of our response teams to quickly identify cases, isolate and treat them, and quarantine their contacts. And with 336 primary and secondary contacts identified and brought into quarantine facilities just overnight, we are off to a good start, thanks to the tireless efforts of our teams on the frontlines.

We have now had 73 cases of COVID-19 reported in Fiji, but what we may have forgotten is that the first 18 cases were detected outside border quarantine, in the community, exactly a year ago in fact. And the response we have today is based on what we did to successfully contain those first 18 cases, together with new knowledge we have about this virus.

However, this incident reminds us again that the only sustainable way in which we protect Fijians will be through COVID-19 vaccines and our hands, face and space, covid safe behaviour. Our border quarantine system has performed exceptionally well, but it is not perfect. Immunity, through vaccines, is the only real long-term solution. As we immunize more of our people, we expect to see health restrictions relax. However, our focus at the present time is on containing the potential spread of the virus from this case. The Fijian public can assist that effort by employing the good habits we have developed over the past year. Wash your hands, maintain physical distance where possible, stay home and report your symptoms if you are feeling unwell. And when you have the chance to be vaccinated, come forward.

Our next batch of vaccines arrive tomorrow and we continue to work on procuring WHO-approved vaccines to be brought to our shores to be administered into arms. Register online, or come to one of our, in-person vaccination registration centre.

We've received some reports of misinformation regarding this latest case. This is nothing new, and we know how damaging this of sort of misinformation can be. By now we should know how important it is that we all rely on updates from official sources, namely the Fijian Government and Ministry of Health and Medical Services Facebook pages. Good information, from credible sources, has always been the key to defeating this virus.

Thank you.