



GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS
OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Address by Acting Prime Minister the Hon. Mark Brown
Cook Islands National Prayer Service for Corona Disease (COVID-19)
Sunday 15 March 2020, 5pm

Kia Orana tatou katoatoa i te aroa maata o to tatou Atua

These are unprecedented times and we as a people and country must be prepared to take unprecedented actions to protect our people.

The seating for our gathering today is social distancing. We will get better at it and it is absolutely vital we all prioritise practicing social distancing. It may well save your life or that of a loved one.

Today around the world we are seeing the impacts of the corona virus. Those countries that followed the advice of their health professionals and experts to practice social distancing, washing of hands, avoiding crowded events, practicing self-isolation are seeing the benefits of reduced rates of infection. Those countries that delayed implementing these practices are now seeing their health services being overwhelmed and their most vulnerable dying as a result.

Social distancing, clean hygienic practices, protecting our borders are some of the measures that we as a country have started to do. And we must do it now we want to protect ourselves and our vulnerable.

Cabinet met this afternoon and yesterday to consider a range of significant decisions to further protect the health of all Cook Islanders, Cook Islands residents and people and reduce the threat of transmission of COVID-19 in the Cook Islands.

These decisions have not been taken lightly by Cabinet and have been made with the ultimate objective of keeping our people safe from the effects of the corona disease.

COVID-19 is a global pandemic which has presented all countries, even the most powerful, with unprecedented challenges and catastrophic effects. These challenges require of our government decisive, considered and unprecedented response measures.

Before I outline the decisions taken by Cabinet this afternoon, I wish to provide some context to our decisions.

First – as of 5pm today, the Cook Islands does not have a confirmed case of COVID-19.

We should all be grateful for the diligence and vigilance of our officials, volunteers and those on the ground working hard at strengthening our planning and preparation for the inevitable arrival of COVID-19. 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 into the Cook Islands.

Second – here are the facts as provided via the World Health Organisation (WHO).

As of Friday, more than 130,000 cases of COVID-19 had been confirmed globally in 117 countries with some 5,000 deaths. Today, there have been more than 162,000 cases confirmed in 146 countries. Between Friday and today, a mere 2 days, more than 25,000 new cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed, 29 new countries have been effected and 977 new deaths. COVID-19 is spreading fast, and no country seems to be immune to its effects.

Third – our COVID-19 response efforts to date have been a combination of measures aimed at restricting the virus coming here through travel restrictions and preparing our health response systems and communities when it does get here.

We were amongst one of the first countries to implement travel restrictions at the border. Led by our National Health Emergency Taskforce (NHET), and working closely with domestic and international agencies, private sector, NGOs and most significantly our communities, through our puna in Rarotonga and the pa enua, we have thus far managed to keep COVID-19 out of our country.

It is right we gather this afternoon for this national prayer service to give thanks to our heavenly father for our blessings and to ask for his continued divine protection.

BUT we must also ourselves, individually and collectively, do more. In many respects, given the global magnitude of COVID-19 and its impacts on all countries, we must rely on ourselves first and foremost. Let us all strengthen our resolve, elevate co-operation and pull together.

It is against this backdrop that Cabinet have taken the following additional measures to further protect our people against COVID-19.

Travel restrictions

As of midnight tomorrow Monday 16 March 2020, every person travelling from or transiting through any country except New Zealand within 14 days prior to travel must have self-quarantined for a minimum of 14 days in New Zealand prior to travel to the Cook Islands. This restriction does not apply to those in the Cook Islands who have only travelled from the Cook Islands to New Zealand within 14 days prior to entry or re-entry to the Cook Islands. This restriction will remain in effect through to Saturday 18 April.

Further, Cabinet approved the postponement of direct flights from French Polynesia, Australia and the United States.

This decision places the Cook Islands amongst a handful of countries, a number of them Pacific Islands, with the widest ranging and toughest border restrictions in the world.

We are encouraging all Cook Islanders to avoid all non-essential travel overseas to help reduce the risk of bringing COVID-19 back with them. Effective henceforth, Ministers, Members of Parliament and all public servants will be restricted from travelling overseas.

We accept that for Cook Islanders and Cook Islands residents overseas this is a stressful time and we encourage those needing consular assistance to contact the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration.

At this juncture, may I on behalf of Government and the people of the Cook Islands acknowledge with deep gratitude the leadership shown and support extended by the Prime Minister and Government of New Zealand in her announcement of travel restrictions and strengthening of border measures on Friday. New Zealand's COVID-19 travel restrictions and screening of departures to the Pacific provide significant additional protection to the Cook Islands and the Pacific. These are warmly welcomed, as is New Zealand's continued assistance through multiple portals towards the Cook Islands COVID-19 response efforts. Meitaki maata.

In addition to restrictions on air travel we are also taking firm measures on cruise ships.

As of midnight tonight, we are issuing a directive to all cruise ships not to come to the Cook Islands until at least 30 June 2020, at which time the directive will be reviewed. The temporary ban will also apply to leisure crafts and yachts.

I want to be clear – these measures relating to air and sea travel are about people, not products. The travel restrictions do not apply to cargo ships or cargo planes or to marine or air crew. Our officials have been working closely with airlines, shippers and wholesales/retailers to ensure we as much as possible minimize air and sea freight routes disruptions while prioritising public health considerations.

We did not take these decisions lightly.

We know these air and sea travel restrictions will place significant strain on airlines and particularly our tourism industry but it is important to note that many of the economic and commercial consequences of COVID-19 have been externally imposed on our country, industry and people. That is the nature of this global pandemic that is COVID-19. Government will continue to work very closely with airlines and our private sector, including banks, to mitigate wherever possible the impacts of these restrictions and COVID-19 effects.

I will as Finance Minister announce a comprehensive economic response, including business continuity package in the week ahead.

Economic considerations

Make no mistake – there will be an economic downturn.

How we position and protect our people and our businesses will be important. The previous years of economic growth has put our country in a good position to support our people and our businesses. We established our Economic Stabilisation fund specifically for events such this pandemic. We have NZ\$56million in the Stabilisation fund. Our emergency response fund of NZ\$10million can be drawn from immediately. Our debt position as a country is healthy and provides us access to the Asian Development Bank to support our response and recovery to Covid-19 in the coming months.

Our officials, led by the Financial Secretary and Ministry of Finance and Economic Management officials, working closely with government agencies, big and small businesses, the transport sector, the banks, importers have been sourcing and collecting critical data to inform the development of a comprehensive economic response plan which I will announce in the next couple of days. The economic response plan will prioritise people, protecting livelihoods and supporting business continuity.

Social distancing measures

The Health Minister will in the week ahead elaborate a suite of additional health measures to scale up the responsiveness of our health system to the virus including the public information campaign and various social distancing measures.

These measures, while disruptive, are needed to create the space we need as a nation to prepare and manage the spread of COVID-19.

We all have obligations to limit the spread of the virus and basic health measures is at the heart of that.

Social distancing practices, reducing person-to-person contact can slow or stop the spread of infectious disease such as COVID-19.

Led by the Ministry of Health and the National Health Emergency Taskforce, government will continue to increase community support to those most vulnerable, including in our pa enua.

In Rarotonga for example, we are working closely with our Puna and community groups to implement strong public health interventions to help limit the spread of infection in the community. Such measures include avoiding large gatherings of people who are in close proximity with each other, such as sporting activities and cultural events. Some churches have cancelled Sunday services, while others have taken measures to limit the risk of spread especially from singing,

Cabinet in their discussions this afternoon agreed school holidays in Rarotonga only will be brought forward to Monday 23 March 2020. Our teachers will use the week ahead to reinforce hand hygiene, cough etiquette and social distancing practices with students, so that they can practice these at home with their families during the school holidays.

The single most important thing each of us can do is to wash our 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 all of us, including those listening in to help me carry this message to every man, woman and child in the Cook Islands. 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 and hugging. Instead, simply share a "kia orana" 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 our people.

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 COVID-19 case in our country, there is a significant portion of our population that is already vulnerable to coronavirus. Those with pre-existing conditions and NCDs — like diabetes, heart disease, and cancer — are at a higher risk of death by COVID-19.

So, I encourage all Cook Islanders 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 COVID-19, and other communicable and non-communicable disease alike.

Government will 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 those 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 and solidarity. Government has already made a number of critical unbudgeted expenditures to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. And it's clear we need to reassess our spending priorities for the remainder of the financial year.

As Finance Minister, in addition to announcing a comprehensive economic response, including business continuity package in the next couple of days, I will table in the coming weeks a COVID-19 Budget which

will lay out governments economic and financial plan for protecting our people and supporting Cook Islands businesses and livelihoods through what will be a difficult time. Leading up to that budget, I will continue to work closely with private sector and our communities to ensure we get it right.

Let me conclude with this.

Ultimately, 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.

These are unprecedented times – and we as a country must be prepared to take unprecedented actions to protect our people, support business continuity and this can only be done when we all work together. Let us focus on doing what is possible, individually and collectively. When we do the possible, God does the impossible. Let us work. Let us work together.

Meitaki maata e kia manuia tatou katoatoa