

Samoa: Death toll mounts in devastating measles epidemic

By Tom Peters
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Every day the death toll from measles increases in Samoa, a small Pacific island country with about 200,000 inhabitants. The outbreak began in mid-October. So far 55 people have died—up from 14 on November 17—the vast majority of them children. As of today, over 3,800 have become sick. Scientists at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, predict that before Christmas the death toll will reach 70 and the number of infected will pass 6,500, more than 3 percent of the population.

A tragedy of terrible proportions is unfolding. The government of Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi declared a state of emergency on November 15. Schools, universities, swimming pools and night clubs have been closed and gatherings of children banned. Streets in the capital Apia are largely deserted and many Christmas events have been cancelled.

Some families have lost more than one child. The *Guardian* recently reported that Tu'ivale Luamanuvae Puelua and his wife Fa'aoso have buried three children, all aged under four. Puelua said: "Your mind becomes empty and you are speechless because there are no words on this earth to describe how my wife and I feel having to say goodbye to our children."

The outbreak is a man-made disaster. Measles is a preventable disease, but Samoa's vaccination rate is extremely low: about 30 to 40 percent among young children according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), down from 84 percent four years ago, which is still too low to prevent an outbreak.

Vaccinations plummeted after two babies died in July 2018 from contaminated doses of the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine. Two nurses were prosecuted and jailed for negligent manslaughter for mistakenly diluting the powdered vaccine with a deadly

dose of anaesthetic instead of water.

The government responded by suspending all MMR immunisations until April 2019, a period of eight months. This extraordinary delay was nothing less than a criminal act of negligence by the state: it left thousands of infant children unimmunised. Radio NZ reported on December 2 that many Samoans say the government "suspended the program for far too long... A lot of people saw this problem coming and there'll be many questions asked."

The crisis has been compounded by pernicious, unscientific anti-vaccination campaigns emanating from the US, Australia and other countries. The *Washington Post* noted that anti-vaccine activist "Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a nephew of President John F. Kennedy, visited [Samoa] in June" and met with Australian Samoan anti-vaccine activist Taylor Winterstein.

Some faith healers and conmen have reportedly sought to profit from Samoa's epidemic by selling bogus treatments and dissuading people from seeking medical care.

About a third of Samoans have been immunised in recent weeks, but hundreds of new cases are appearing nearly every day, with children most at risk. Measles is less fatal in adults, but poses serious risks including pneumonia, encephalitis and weakened immunity to other illnesses. It can lead to pregnant women giving birth prematurely or miscarrying.

Hospitals are under immense pressure. On November 28, Red Cross health worker Karen Page told Radio NZ Samoan hospitals urgently needed "qualified ICU general and paediatric nurses just to cope with the workload." Most government departments will shut down on December 5 and 6 so staff can help vaccinate people.

The resurgence of measles is a global phenomenon. During the first six months of 2019 there were more cases worldwide than in any year since 2006, according to the WHO, due to falling vaccination rates. The lies of the anti-vaccination movement have certainly played a role, but the main factor is the lack of well-funded public health services and vaccination programs.

Samoa's outbreak is suspected to have originated in New Zealand, where, according to the NZ Ministry of Health, immunisation coverage for two-year-olds is 91 percent. This is below the 95 percent threshold needed for what is known as herd immunity, to avoid an outbreak. New Zealand has recorded more than 2,000 measles cases this year.

NZ's Immunisation Advisory Centre had been predicting the outbreak for years, but governments ignored requests for a "catch-up" immunisation campaign. The decline in vaccinations is particularly bad in rural areas, such as Northland, and in working class South Auckland, which has a large Samoan community and drastically overstretched health services. There is a nationwide shortage of nurses, doctors and other healthcare professionals due to decades of funding cuts.

As well as Samoa, measles has spread from New Zealand to Tonga, where more than 400 people caught the virus but no deaths have been reported. On November 29, Fiji had confirmed 14 cases of the disease.

New Zealand also bears responsibility for the poorly resourced health system in Samoa. The islands were a NZ colony from 1914 to 1962, a period which left a legacy of poverty and economic backwardness. NZ still maintains neo-colonial domination over Samoa, Tonga and other impoverished Pacific countries, which rely heavily on foreign aid to fund public services.

New Zealand and Australia's ruling elites have invested billions of dollars in diplomatic and economic projects in the Pacific region, and on militarisation, as part of the US imperialist-led effort to counter China's growing influence in the region. Meanwhile the basic health needs of Pacific people have been neglected.

On November 13, Dr Helen Petousis-Harris, a vaccine specialist at Auckland University, told Radio NZ she was frustrated with New Zealand's slow response to the Samoan epidemic. The virus was spreading "like a wildfire that is burning now out of

control" and an urgent mass immunisation campaign was needed.

Dr Petousis-Harris explained that Samoa has had "a sustained, very low uptake of measles vaccines for years." Even before the suspension of vaccinations in 2018 an outbreak "was always on the cards." The regional imperialist powers, Canberra and Wellington, had done nothing to fix the immunisation gap.

The Labour Party-led government in New Zealand waited until November 19, several weeks into the outbreak, before sending an initial team of 10 doctors and nurses to Samoa. There are now 54 NZ medical personnel in the islands, and teams from the UK and French Polynesia.

On December 2, Radio NZ journalist Lisa Owen asked Foreign Minister Winston Peters whether there had been any discussions with Samoan officials earlier in the year to warn them about the potential threat from New Zealand's outbreak. Peters replied that "conversations were going on," but gave no details.

Peters admitted that New Zealand had "not been as efficient as we should have been" in vaccinating people, before declaring that now was not the time for the media to be "pointing fingers."

The deadly outbreak is a damning indictment of successive governments in Samoa and New Zealand, which ignored repeated warnings about the danger posed by low immunisation rates, while starving health services of funds.

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