Pacific's Samoa records first case of coronavirus

19 November 2020

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Samoa announced its first case of COVID-19 on Thursday, as the coronavirus pandemic continued to spread to previously untouched Pacific island nations.

Prime Minister Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi called for calm in the nation of 200,000 after confirming a man who flew into the country last Friday tested positive while in managed isolation.

"We now have one case and will be added to the countries of the world that have the coronavirus," the mask-wearing leader said during a televised address on Thursday.

Until recently, the remote Pacific islands were among the most successful in the world at keeping out the virus after closing their borders early in response to the threat, despite the huge cost to tourism-reliant economies.

But in the past two months, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, the Marshall Islands and now Samoa have lost their coveted virus-free status, although none have so far reported community transmission.

The island nations and territories of Kiribati, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Tonga, and Tuvalu are believed to still be free of the virus.

The cautious approach adopted in the Pacific islands was prompted by fears they are particularly vulnerable because of poor hospital infrastructure and high rates of underlying health conditions such as obesity and heart disease.

The devastation a viral outbreak can create in such a fragile environment was demonstrated during a measles epidemic in Samoa late last year that claimed 83 lives, most of them babies and toddlers.

Malielegaoi said the infected man, a sailor, had arrived on a repatriation flight via Auckland, one of the few border arrivals Samoa has allowed in recent months.

He did not say where the man was previously based but said he tested negative before departing New Zealand but a swab came back positive on Tuesday.

He said an announcement would be made later Thursday on whether any measures would be introduced among the general population to prevent the virus spreading.

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