



Office of the Prime Minister
Press Release

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MEDIA RELEASE

Prime Minister Hon Henry Puna – Address to the Nation

Kia Orana, It is with the greatest pleasure that I join you on this most special occasion today, which we all know is Mother's Day. Mothers are without doubt the backbone of every country. So to all the mothers out there a 'Happy Mother's Day'.

Here's hoping that you have been suitably spoilt by your husbands and children today.

I also want to acknowledge those families and children, like me, whose mothers have passed on, and are now keeping watch over us from above. Memories of our mums will never ever fade, and will always come back fresh and strong every Mother's Day.

In Proverbs 1:8-9, 'Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mothers teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head, and pendants for your neck'.

Like the bible verse, we do wear our mothers' teachings every day and throughout our lifetime. Our mothers are the epitome of sacrifice, love and affection. They do everything to please our families, but we take those efforts for granted. They are the nucleus of our families, and their place in this world is to provide comfort and solace to the suffering humanity. We are extremely grateful for our mothers, in the Cook Islands and abroad, and may I take this opportunity to say a humbling 'Happy Mother's Day' to you all.

On that note, we welcome our Mamas, and all our stranded Cook Islanders in the first cohort that arrived on Friday. It was a historic moment for us all in the Cook Islands, as the COVID-19 pandemic has divided our returnees from their families and loved ones for so long. The arrival of the first cohort was met with an incredible warm welcome from our people. From all the officials and supporting groups at the Airport, to the Edgewater Resort in their heart-warming reception "meitaki maata. We are absolutely blessed to have our first cohort arrive safely, and we wish them well in completing the 14 days quarantine requirements.

I humbly ask our people, please support our officials meet the security protocol required to keep our returned Cook Islanders safe in their hotel rooms. I ask that you honour the public health and strict quarantine measures put in place, to help our returnees and the rest of our people to remain COVID-19 free. I acknowledge there may be minor hiccups, please bear with us as we try to resolve them. This is definitely something new for all of us, and we can only get better as we move forward

In regards to our repatriation process this weekend, the third and final mop-up group of 29 people entered the Holiday Inn this past Friday to begin their 14 day supervised

quarantine process. The second cohort of just over 100 are already a week plus into theirs. We look forward to welcoming them home this coming Friday, and the third mop-up group the Friday after. We expect to have everyone complete their 14 days supervised quarantine in Rarotonga by the first Friday of June 2020.

As I've discussed with our senior officials, the next focus after our cohorts have completed their 14 days supervised quarantine, is to plan for the possibility of lifting our international border restrictions, as safely as possible, but without compromising the safety of our people from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like many of our Pacific neighbours, and many countries around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken its toll on our economy, and the many livelihoods of our people, who have suffered a loss of income, and the associated emotional distress that comes with it.

Our Ministry of Finance and Economic Development are successfully managing the Economic Response Plan Stage 1, and are planning Stage 2 to be implemented shortly.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to diversify our economy, Tourism may continue to be a key priority to re-engage our economy in the immediate term. There are important steps that we must take to prepare us for such a time, when we are ready to reopen our borders safely.

Firstly, we will monitor the situation in New Zealand, and how the border restrictions and physical and social distancing measures will play out, in the next weeks and months. The New Zealand market makes up 67% of our international visitors, and it is the appropriate market for us to consider. It will take time for the other markets to recover, particularly our Northern Hemisphere markets.

Secondly, we will be guided by Te Marae Ora on the health requirements for our international visitors moving forward. Te Marae Ora is also working to increase clinical capabilities in the Rarotonga Hospital, which is now equipped with a vital piece of medical infrastructure, that can be used to treat critically ill COVID-19 patients, and other potentially fatal infectious illnesses. The hospital now has a negative pressure room - an isolated area found in hospitals - that helps prevent cross-contamination across rooms. Our health and finance officials are also working quickly, to purchase a new oxygen plant, and a CT scan. These are important to help prepare our health system, to respond to COVID-19, should it cross our borders.

Furthermore, WHO has supplied the test kits that will allow us to test for COVID-19 in Rarotonga. This is very important for us, to help us diagnose the disease early. May I also acknowledge the Australian Government for providing additional test kits for us. I was with the Australian High Commissioner at the airport last Friday to welcome our stranded Cook Islanders and also to witness the arrival of these test kits. Our international partnerships have been critical and most helpful during this challenging time.

Thirdly, we need to start marketing the Cook Islands internationally, particularly in the New Zealand market. The timing for the marketing campaigns will be executed by the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, once we are more clear and confident with the resources required, to help prepare the Cook Islands in reopening its borders safely. I encourage you to remain calm during this difficult time, while we work to address the concerns for our economy, and social welfare.

On a final and important note, I wish our people in the Pa Enea well, and would like to make the following notes.

Since declaring the Cook Islands as a COVID-19 free zone, it is imperative that we follow the official public health measures precisely. For example, there are no ministerial orders for curfews, and limiting the movement of our people. And please keep in mind that Government has already lifted the restrictions on travel to the Pa Enea. All public health measures apply to all of us as one nation, regardless if you are in Rarotonga or the Pa Enea. We must uphold the inherent dignity and rights of our people, as the foundation of our democracy.

Finally, and while we are focused on COVID-19, may I remind you all that dengue is still present, particularly in Rarotonga. Te Marae Ora has implemented the Mosquito Control Prevention Programme, to help mitigate the spread of dengue. To assist Te Marae Ora in these efforts, I urge our people to avoid travelling to the Pa Enea, if you have dengue. There will be a registered nurse present at the Air Raro area, an hour prior to departure, to check the temperature of all the passengers travelling to the Pa Enea. If there is fever(38°C), sore eyes, headaches, muscle pains and sore joints, nausea and vomiting, lethargic and weakness, the passenger will be asked not to travel.

I wish you all a good week ahead. Please don't drop your guard on good hygiene practices. Keep up the regular handwashing with soap and water, do not touch your face, cover your coughs and sneezes, and ensure there is reasonable physical distancing from each other. I ask that you look after your well-being during this time, and to talk to someone if you need any help.

Meitaki Maata e kia manuia tatou katoatoa.