



OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER
HON MARK BROWN
GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS

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Kia Orana,

I hope you have all enjoyed the weekend spending time with anau and friends and celebrating the Resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

In the meantime, we believe we are also close to resurrecting our ailing economy by shortly being able to reopen our borders to visitors from New Zealand.

When the Cook Islands were declared a COVID-19 free zone almost a year ago, on 16 April, Government's strategy was and continues to be, to strengthen efforts on mitigating the public health risk at the border between the Cook Islands and New Zealand. In other words, 'keep it out'.

We continue to learn more about this virus every day. This has been helped by the unprecedented sharing of information across the world and in particular between New Zealand Health officials and our own.

So we are confident that our high level of health preparedness and rapid response in close collaboration with New Zealand will firstly, greatly reduce the risk of COVID entering the country, and secondly include containment measures that can be initiated quickly should they be needed.

Two weeks ago, my delegation and I experienced first-hand, the border preparedness at Auckland International Airport; the "green zones" provide for safe border entry and departure without mixing with transit passengers or returnees heading for MIQ. Dedicated airline and airport staff for "green zone travellers" are also kept from mixing with other airline and airport staff. This is what visitors will experience when coming here once we open our border and it has been heartening to see first-hand and experience the levels of protection at the border.

A major part of our visit to Aotearoa was sharing the extent of our health and border readiness endeavours over the last 12 months. Secretary of Health Bob Williams and his colleagues, who return home next week, are working in Wellington with New

Zealand Ministry of Health officials to complete final reviews of both countries COVID health surge response and contingency arrangements, which will support the Quarantine Free Travel Arrangement.

Secretary Williams and his team have also visited the Trentham Army Vaccination Centre last week to see first-hand New Zealand's vaccine roll-out. This work will help finalise our own vaccination and roll-out plan, including transport and coordination details for when the vaccine becomes available to us.

By the time I pen my next column the setup of a special laboratory that will significantly improve Cook Islands' COVID-19 testing capabilities should be complete. The reverse-transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) test is the gold standard for COVID-19 testing worldwide.

As we have seen in New Zealand and other countries who have been successful at keeping COVID-19 under control, even without community transmission, we must continue to remind ourselves about the safety measures we can take to protect our families and communities. This needs to be everyone's responsibility, not just the government.

Last week we shared with New Zealand officials the reality on the state of our economy and the interventions required to support our economic recovery in the coming months.

In the coming weeks, together with the team of officials, I will work to capitalise on the meetings held in New Zealand, converting undertakings from discussions into reality, not just with respect to health preparedness but also our recovery plan.

Much work has been undertaken this past year by the whole country, however, we have not been able to do this on our own and we will need the continued help of our people, the Aronga Mana, Religious Advisory Council, NGOs, my parliamentary colleagues, the Private Sector, youth, our Puna, and Pa Enuā. Only by working together will we overcome the obstacles for our country to recover and grow.

Kia Manuia.

Hon Mark Brown
Prime Minister