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By LANCE SEETO

SCHOOL LUNCH IDEAS

PAGES 16-17



The Sunday Times

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PRIYANKA CHOPRA:

I'M A SUM OF ALL MY DECISIONS



PAGE 20



Day on the beach

Peniasi Tuivomo (right) with his family members enjoying the New Year's Day at the Saweni beach in Lautoka yesterday.
Picture: BALJEET SINGH

'IMPOSSIBLE TO MAINTAIN COVID-19 PROTOCOLS IN SCHOOLS'

Unions call for a delay

By LITIA CAVA

THE country's two teacher unions are calling for a delay in reopening of schools because of the rapid increase in COVID-19 cases. The unions said it would be impossible to maintain COVID-19 protocols in schools. However, Education Minister Premila Kumar said the ministry placed a strong emphasis on education and would not want to compromise children's education through longer school closure. In a statement, the ministry said school would open as advised earlier.

MORE reports PAGES 23

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risk lives of our children

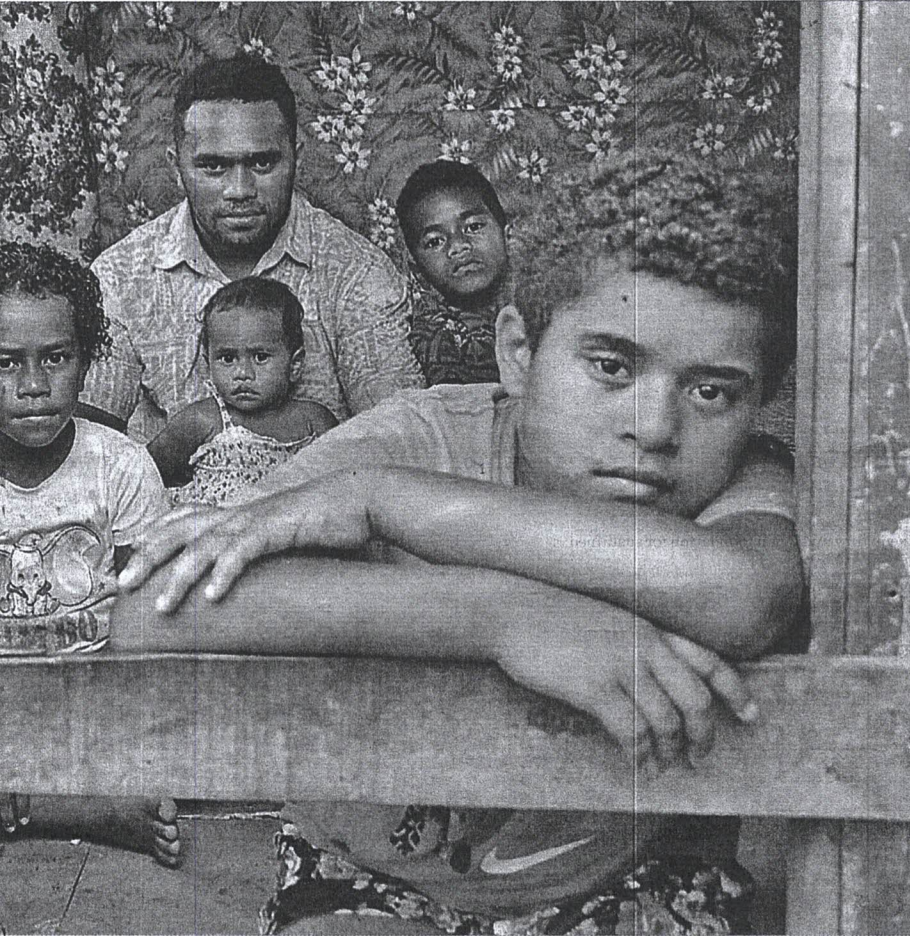
children with this deadly virus on our shores.
 "An extension to the reopening of the schools is needed in Fiji."
 "I believe there are other ways of educating children."
 Responding to the comments

made, Health Ministry permanent secretary Dr James Fong said all opinions were being considered.
 "We have a team of MOH, Education, and UN development partners discussing the safe opening of schools," he said.

"All opinions are being considered."
 In a statement on Thursday, Education Minister Premila Kumar said schools would reopen as earlier advised.
 She said Years 8 to 13 would

begin on January 4 and early childhood education (ECE) to Year 7 start on January 10.
 Ms Kumar said they held daily discussions with the Health Ministry, World Health Organization and UNICEF and if the situation

changed, she would make an appropriate announcement.
 Questions sent to the Education Minister Ms Kumar on the comments made by Ms Lata remained unanswered when this edition went to press.



Makelesi Tinai weaves mats at Wainunu settlement in Nakasi on Friday. Picture: JONACANI LALAKOBAU

Widow clueless on how to send kids to school

By WANSHIKA KUMAR

THE death of Makelesi Tinai's husband early last year has left her clueless as to how she will send her children to school.
 The mother of two said they were struggling to put food on the table and the opening of schools placed an extra burden on her.
 "My husband passed away in May and we don't have any source of income," she said.
 "After his death, until now we are struggling to meet our daily needs and sending my children to school is another challenge for me."
 The Wainunu settlement resident said she had

applied for assistance and was waiting for a positive feedback.
 "My eldest son who is in Year 12 and after his father started getting sick, he didn't want to go to school so now he's working on a farm nearby to help us.
 "The past months were a struggle for us as we haven't paid our rent and in terms of food, my son gets something from the farm or sometimes some people assist us.
 "I feel very hopeless as we have no income to depend on and to prepare for my son's school, who is in Year 5.
 "We are in need of assistance and we are just waiting for someone to assist us."

Unions: Impossible to maintain COVID-19 protocols

By LITIA CAVA



THE Education Ministry should weigh their options carefully before reopening schools next week, says the two teacher unions.
 The unions said it would be impossible to maintain COVID-19 protocols in schools.
 Fijian Teachers Association general secretary Paula Manumanunitoga said the ministry should defer the reopening of

schools for at least a month.
 According to the two teacher unions, teachers will have a hard time in school trying to ensure that students adhere to social distancing and mask-wearing.
 Fiji Teachers Union (FTU) general secretary Agni Deo Singh said the authorities should weigh their options carefully before reopening schools next week.
 "The decision to reopen schools



Agni Deo Singh. Picture: FILE

should be based on clear information," he said.
 "The magnitude on the spread of the Omicron virus is not clear, but the information given by the health authorities show that the cases are increasing rapidly.
 "We must ensure that we are not putting the health and safety of our children at risk."
 The Minister for Education, Heritage, and Arts, Premila Ku-


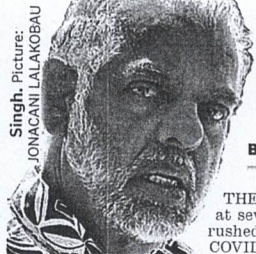
mar, has confirmed schools will open as advised earlier.
 Years 8 to 13 will start school on January 4, 2022, while early childhood education (ECE) to Year 7 will start on January 10, 2022.

HAVE YOUR SAY

Write to us at letters@fijitimes.com.fj to share your views on this topic

INSIDE TOMORROW

BollyBaat
CELEBRITY GOSSIP & NEWS

Students

By FELIX CHAUDHARY

THE Fiji Teachers Union claims students at several schools who fell sick and were rushed to hospital, had tested positive for COVID-19.

FTU general secretary Agni Deo Singh called on the Education Ministry to "seriously reconsider their plans to allow early childhood education to Year 7 students to begin school on Monday".
"The ministry must ensure the health and lives of children are put first and foremost."

INSIDE The Fiji Times

NATIONAL NEWS.....	2-5, 7	OPINION.....	14
BACK IN HISTORY.....	6	BUSINESS.....	15-17
YOUR VIEWS.....	8-9	WORLD.....	20, 22-23
PEOPLE.....	12	SPORTS.....	29-32

Body mistakenly released

By LITIA CAVA

A BA man is asking questions of the Health Ministry after his brother's body was mistakenly released to a family from Navua at the Suva morgue.

Umesh Prakash said his family left their home in Ba at 1am yesterday to travel to Suva to pick his brother Salesh Subaiya's body from the mortuary.

He said they were shocked to find out that his brother's body had been given to a family in Navua and the funeral rites had already been done.

Mr Prakash said it was a sad day for his family because they were not able to farewell his brother "in a proper manner".

Mr Prakash said his brother died in December last year and is survived by his wife and two children. Police said they were looking into the issue.



WHAT'S HAPPENING TODAY

COVID-19
 People with severe COVID-19 are still dying at home, or are coming to a medical facility in the late stages of severe illness. Severe COVID-19 is a medical emergency, and a delay in receiving appropriate medical treatment reduces your chance of recovering from the disease.

Editor's movie picks:
 The King's Man: Village 6 - 2pm, 8.20pm
 Village 4 - 10.30am, 5.40pm
 Life Cinema Nakasi - 1.40pm
 Pushpa: The Rise Part One - Village 6 - 10am, 5pm
 Village 4 - 10am, 5pm
 Life Cinema Nakasi - 10.30am, 7.35pm.
 Life Cinema Lautoka - 1.55pm, 7.30pm

For more updates visit our website www.fijitimes.com

Weather

TODAY: Occasional rain, heavy at times and few thunderstorms. Localised heavy falls may lead to flash flooding of low lying areas. Motorists can expect poor visibility and unfavourable driving conditions in areas of heavy falls.

Details: PAGE 25

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Students of Rishikul Sanatan College after school in Nasinu yesterday. Picture: SOPHIE RALULU

Health Ministry to announce more stringent measures

By FELIX CHAUDHARY

HEALTH Ministry permanent secretary Dr James Fong says he will be announcing more stringent measures relating to masking and social gatherings this week in the wake of escalating cases of COVID-19 across the country.

He made the comment in a statement issued on Wednesday where he announced two new deaths to COVID-19 and 1741 new infections in the seven days to Tuesday, January 4.

Dr Fong said the two deaths were a fully vaccinated 75-year-old male from Suva, who died at home on December 31 who had significant pre-existing medical conditions and a partially vaccinated 56-year-

old female from Korovou who died at home on January 1 in respiratory distress who had multiple pre-existing medical conditions.

"We have always promoted individual COVID safe measures, even during the period of local cases prior to the current outbreak," he said.

"However, it is evident that we need to have in place more stringent community-level measures to further enforce the message we are promoting.

"As such we will be announcing more stringent measures related to masking and social gatherings later this week."

Of the 1741 new cases, 709 were recorded in the Central Division, 303 in the Western Division, 23 in the Eastern Division and 706 in the Northern Division.

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Celebrating our Past, Inspiring our Future

test positive — FTU

he said.
Mr Singh claimed that Education Minister Premila Kumar was "out of touch with reality" and was "placing the health and safety of children at risk".
The learned minister is very far

removed from reality when she says schools are safer than the community in terms of transmissibility of the virus," he said.
"She forgets students are in school for a few hours, the rest of the time they are out in the com-

munity.
"They could be coming from homes or have family members that have the virus or they could also contract it on the way to school because of the way they travel to school. I don't think

she fully understands what she is talking about."
Mr Singh said a number of teachers had tested positive for COVID-19 and were placed in isolation, and others were apprehensive about taking the virus home

and exposing their loved ones to it.
Questions sent yesterday to Mrs Kumar and permanent secretary Dr Anjeela Jokhan on the comments made by Mr Singh remain unanswered.



Patients crowd the Valelevu Health Center in Nasinu yesterday. Picture: SOPHIE RALULU

Fong urged to 'stop being so secretive'

By FELIX CHAUDHARY

STOP being so secretive and stop downplaying the number of people infected by COVID-19 because we are talking about people's lives.

This was the urgent plea from Fiji Nurses Association president Dr Alisi Vudiniabola to Health Ministry permanent secretary Dr James Fong.

"The FNA is concerned at the way the current wave is being downplayed by the Government since its official confirmation last week," she said.

"We have not seen a press conference, we have not heard any new directive to stop mass gatherings, et cetera; we have not seen any active interest in the contact tracing or testing to identify the extent of the Omicron infections against the Delta strain.

"I feel that it is very irresponsible of the Government to keep everyone ig-

norant of the tremendous risks that the current wave has over the people of Fiji — especially the vulnerable groups like our unvaxxed children who are now in schools and our people who work in resorts and businesses."

Dr Vudiniabola said if Government did not want to close borders, then it would have to immediately put a stop to gatherings and take other more stringent measures.

"The gravity of the situation is not being made clear to the public and Dr Fong has a duty of care to inform the public of the true nature of this outbreak so people can take it seriously."

Dr Fong said he did not understand what Dr Vudiniabola was saying.

"The positive rate is 34 per cent, how much more clear does that make it," he said.

Dr Fong said a press statement with minister Faiyaz Koya about stringent measures would be made today.

FLOTSAM AND JETSAM

■ EDITOR

BEACHCOMBER heard about a mate's kids who 'donated' their school uniforms to the poor box at church.

When told school was about to begin, the kids said they couldn't go because they had no uniforms.

"We know times are hard and it is too much for you to go and buy new ones," they said.

"You're going to school, the ministry said mufti is allowed until April," replied dad with a smile.

Cala tale!

'UNICEF has no business in supporting decision'

By FELIX CHAUDHARY

UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) has no business in supporting the Government's decision to send children to school in the middle of the third wave of COVID-19 involving the highly infectious Omicron variant, says Fiji Nursing Asso-

ciation president Dr Alisi Vudiniabola.
"Does UNICEF have the capacity to support every child in school against the impending Omicron or is it about ticking its KRA (key result areas) boxes?" she asked.
"Education can happen in the safety of our homes and not in schools alone and right now our children are safe at home."

Dr Vudiniabola said she was raising concerns because of the escalating number of new COVID-19 cases and also because nurses and doctors were being infected during the third wave.
"We are unnecessarily putting everyone's life at risk — for what?"
"We know that the hospitals and the health service are now under tremendous

strain to keep functioning despite the number of nurses and doctors who have now become sick. A few health centres in the Central Division are now heavily affected and how long will the main hospitals hold out, is anyone's guess."
UNICEF said it did not wish to comment on the statement by Dr Vudiniabola.

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