

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

Remarks of the CEO



The Office of the Ombudsman acknowledges the tireless efforts of all front-liners in the “war” against COVID-19. As the nation unites in solidarity with health authorities in this cause, good governance (GG) serves as the guiding principles in all these efforts.

The Office has put in place new policies on COVID-19 aimed at protecting employees. To learn more about the pandemic and preventative measures, Public Health consultant, Dr. Viliami Puloka, shared key insights with staff during the quarter.

The Office operated fully with its essential team despite the lockdown caused by the volcanic eruptions and tsunami as well as the COVID-19.

The Office themes of good governance for January; rule of law for February and independence for March serve as reminders of the overall theme of **“Resilience by Good Governance”** for 2022.

Malo ‘aupito,
Mrs. ‘Alisi Taumoepeau, KC.
Chief Executive Officer
Office of the Ombudsman.



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January: Good Governance

The Office continues to carry the torch of good governance during a very challenging three-month quarter from January to March, 2022. The theme of **“Resilience through Good Governance”** was upheld throughout this challenging time. January has seen the eruption of Hunga Tonga and Hunga Ha’apai volcanoes followed immediately by the Tsunami of 15th January.

The Office invited Fr. ‘Ekuasi Manu, Principal of ‘Api Fo’ou College, in January to bless the Office and staff where he spoke of the resilience of Job in the Bible while going through very hard times when he lost everything. Fr. Manu likened the resilience and determination of Job not to divert from the love of God to the works of the Office in helping people who are not happy with government’s decisions and services.

Fr. Manu spoke to us two days before the Hunga Tonga and Hunga Ha’apai volcanic eruption and the Tsunami.



February brought the community outbreak of COVID-19 that led to the extended lockdown especially for Tongatapu and Vava’u. This lockdown was also extended to March and covered Ha’apai in the latter part of March. Only ‘Eua and the two Niuas remain COVID-free during the quarter. This disrupted virtually all services of both government and non-government organizations. Essential staff led by the Ombudsman and management were able to man the Office and attended to complaints and enquiries via the 0800 number and emails – for the Tongatapu and Neiafu offices.

These natural and man-made calamities were not restricted to the boundaries of Tonga. Instead, the pandemic has virtually covered every corner of the world since two years ago. However, it was only discovered in Tonga from late January to early February when two wharf employees were initially identified with the Omicron variant. This led to the community outbreak mostly on Tongatapu and to some extent in Vava’u. From mid-March, the virus skipped to Ha’apai from travelers from Tongatapu to the island. They were quickly contained when the travelers were kept in the managed isolation quarantine (MIQ) area.

Community spread was not discovered until the first week of April. During this difficult time, being resilience through Good Governance, is the solution the Office of the Ombudsman wishes to promote. @OMBTonga.

February: Rule of Law

New Policy on COVID-19 Vaccination

The Office has a new policy on the COVID-19 pandemic.

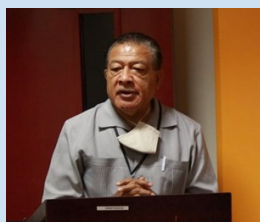
The Ombudsman Policy Manual was amended on 4th of February by inserting a new section as Policy 2.10A relating to the Pandemic COVID-19 Vaccination.

Under the new policy, all staff members must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 in accordance with the vaccination protocols of the Ministry of Health. This is to protect themselves and other staff members. It requires staff to be vaccinated at least twice with official evidence provided to the Office. @OMBTonga.

March: Independence

COVID-19 and Good Governance

“Your fundamental responsibility is to safeguard and promote good health as a basic habit. It is your contribution towards overall health and wellbeing,” a challenge made by Dr. Viliami Puloka (right), an expert in Public Health in Tonga and the region.



Dr. Puloka was invited as guest speaker of the Office of the Ombudsman on 1st of March, 2022, a quarterly activity aimed at helping the work of the Office.

“We must appreciate that being healthy is our core responsibility. No one can do it better than you,” urged Dr. Puloka.

Tonga and COVID-19

Dr. Puloka believes that Tonga is quite fortunate that the majority of the people have been immunized against COVID-19 before its outbreak. The variant Omicron is said to be less severe than other variants even though it spread faster. Even if the variant Delta arrives, people have been vaccinated “but it is more important to adhere to warnings of health authorities and take precautions,” Dr. Puloka told staff.

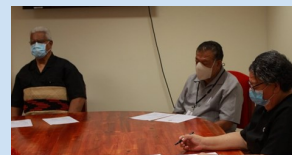
Most countries bear the brunt of the pandemic over the past two years when no vaccination was initially discovered at the time that led to many deaths including of elderly people and those with underlying pre-medical conditions.

Importance of warnings of health authorities

Obeying and heeding warnings of health authorities is key in curbing the spread of the pandemic. According to Dr. Puloka, the virus that causes COVID-19 is a half-developed parasite that needs another living being to become fully developed. “It lives on other living things as a parasite and constantly changes its nature from time to time.

“Once you are careless, the virus enters and damage your body until you die,” warns Dr. Puloka.

(Right: The Ombudsman, Mr. ‘Aisea Taumoepeau, SC., Dr. Puloka and CEO, Mrs. ‘Alisi Taumoepeau, KC.)



The Ministry of Health has been working hard to minimize or stop the spread of COVID-19. “But its greatest enemy is when people fail to obey warnings and take necessary precautions.” Restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of the pandemic include visiting other people, keeping the 1.5 – 2.0 meters’ social distancing, wearing of face-masks and being in a large crowd.

“The spread of COVID does not happen at the hospital, instead, it spread at your home and other places, in your own time. When you fail to obey the instructions, that is the very virus that hampers the war against COVID-19,” stressed Dr. Puloka.

At the same time, he is optimistic that Tonga could be saved if people are willing to obey instructions. He said the Ministry of Health has diverted its focus towards fighting against the pandemic instead of its basic responsibilities of the overall wellbeing of the people.

“Being free of sickness does not mean that you are healthy. Likewise, when you are unwell does not mean you are sickly.

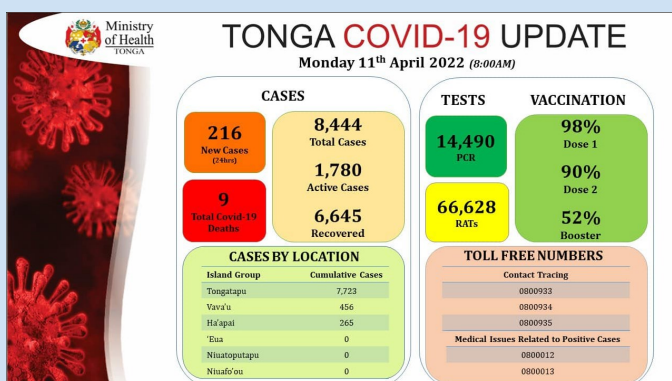
“According to the World Health Organization (WHO), being healthy means the balance of your physical, mental and social wellbeing. No one has achieved that,” Dr. Puloka said.

Since the global outbreak of the pandemic, it has been responsible for over 6-million deaths and 462 million people killed up to 15th of March. In Tonga, 98 per cent of the eligible people have received their first jab, 91 per cent with second jab and 41 per cent have received their booster shots.

Tonga recorded the first COVID-19 local case on the 1st of February, 2022, with the Omicron variant. As of mid-March, 2,000 people have tested positive for the virus, two deaths have been attributed to the virus though they had pre-medical conditions.

Dr. Puloka has worked in Tonga and 22 Pacific Island countries for more than 30 years primarily on the fights against non-communicable diseases (NCDs), a field he currently works on in New Zealand. While in Tonga, he helps the Ministry of Health in urging people to cooperate in the fight against the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the latest COVID-19 update from the Ministry of Health was issued on Monday, 11th of April, with a total of 8,444 cases, as the statistics below. @OMBTonga.



Volcanic Eruption & Tsunami

The Office, like other essential services, continued to work during the suspension of services from 17th – 21st of January, due to the volcanic eruption from Hunga Tonga and Hunga Ha'apai and the Tsunami of Saturday, 15th January. This was led by the Ombudsman, Mr. 'Aisea Taumoepeau, SC., and the management committee.

Staff were quickly notified on Sunday, 16th January, through text messaging to remain at home during the week. Only seven (7) essential staff members were recalled to work. Communication was critically hampered due to the severe damage to the undersea fiber optic cable that enabled all international communications. Despite the challenges, the management worked to ensure very minimal impact on the operation of the Office.

They were able to attend to most pressing needs especially public complaints, communication matters and the general welfare of the Office. A special decision was also made for the Director of Investigations, Mr. Roman Vaihū, to travel to Vava'u to check on the wellbeing of the two officers as well as the office.

The Office resumed duty on the last week of January.

All of Tongatapu was covered by the ash with coastal areas of Nuku'alofa, Kanokupolu as well as 'Atatā island, 'Eua, Mango and Nomuka islands of Ha'apai, were severely affected by the Tsunami.

In another development, His Majesty, King Tupou VI has consented to relocate affected people on his estates of Mango and Kanokupolu to Futu in 'Eua and Matakī'eua, respectively. HRH Crown Prince Tupouto'a 'Ulukalala has consented to relocate people affected in Nomuka to higher land of the island while HRH Prince Ata consented to move people from devastated 'Atatā island to higher ground of his estate of Kolovai.

The Prime Minister, Hon. Siaosi Sovaleni, has confirmed to Tonga's Development Partners in early March that a total of T\$565.9 million (USD\$240 million) is needed to fund the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai Recovery and Resilience Building Plan 2022-2025. Cabinet has endorsed government's guiding document on the recovery and resilience building plan following the events of January 15, 2022. @OMBTonga.

Virtual Workshop on Regional Community Outreach

The importance of holding outreach programs by the Offices of the Ombudsman in the region, Tonga included, is to ensure the public is well informed about good governance and ways they could be assisted by these offices.

The Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Mrs. 'Alisi Taumoepeau, KC., led the Office in a virtual workshop on Regional Community Outreach organized and conducted by the Office of the Ombudsman New Zealand. The 2-hour zoom workshop was held on Wednesday, 16th March, and included the Director of Investigations, Mr. Roman Vaihū, and the Communications & Media Officer, Ms. Nanise Fifita.



Participants from Ombudsman offices of New Zealand, Cook Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu shared milestones of having to conduct outreach programs during this COVID pandemic. Tonga focused on maintaining contact with the public across the country and also the diasporas through electronic media – radio, TV and the internet. The promotional clip currently aired over national radio and TV – Tonga Broadcasting Commission – was also played for the workshop participants.

A question was raised and responses were shared on how effective radio and TV in informing and educating the public, a practice commonly used by the Tonga Office of the Ombudsman. Due to the geographical nature of Tonga's scattered islands, radio is the most efficient and effective platform for outreaching during this prolonged lockdown period. The main island of Tongatapu as well as Vava'u have been on lockdown virtually since the volcanic eruption of 15th January and the COVID-19 outbreak since late January. Physical outreach programs are being suspended indefinitely due to the prolonged restrictions on the outbreak.

The NZ Office of the Ombudsman also mooted the idea of establishing an annual Ombudsman Day for the Pacific. The idea was welcomed in principle by the participating countries. @OMBTonga.



Outreach Programs

During the quarter, the people were well informed about the services of the Office via daily radio and TV promotional advertisements, newsletters as well as live radio talkback programs (*Felafoaki*), as itemized below.

Radio & Television – In February, the Office began airing a 3-minute promotional advertisement. The services of the Office and contact information are being constantly reminded to the public through the daily broadcasts of the advertisement. The use of the media platform is seen as the most effective and efficient mean of communicating and staying in touch with the public in this lockdown period.

Live Radio Talkback (*Felafoaki*) - On 18th of March, the Office held its first Talk-back/*Felafoaki* program for the year, over Radio Tonga (A3Z) on both AM and FM frequencies. The second program was held over the same platform on the 25th of March. Through these platforms, the program was heard across the Tonga Group and also in the diasporas through livestreaming, and especially after a lull of several months. Key information was shared with the public in these two programs led by the Director of Investigations, Mr. Roman Vaihu, and the Principal Investigation Officer, Mr. Pilimiso Tamo'ua. To ensure a proactive platform with the public, part of the air-time allowed call-ins from the public to ask certain matters of their concern and seeking the advice of the officers. Several callers were advised to call the toll-free number (0800 662) so their enquiries could be further discussed and potentially to lodge formal complaints.

Newsletters – Two newsletters were produced and distributed during the quarter.

1. December 2021 Quarterly Newsletter – distributed electronically on the 7th and 11th of January, in English and Tongan, respectively.
2. Special Newsletter edition on the Volcanic Eruption and Tsunami - released electronically on 4th and 9th February, in English and Tongan.
3. March, 2022 Quarterly Report

Acknowledgement of gratitude as well as well-wishes to the Ombudsman and his staff were sent from the Chief Ombudsman of New Zealand, Judge Boshier, the Chief Ombudsman of Samoa, Ms. Luamanuvao Katalaina Sapolu, and the Ombudsman of the Republic of Vanuatu, Mr. Hamison Bulu, amongst others. Your appreciation means a lot to the Ombudsman, management and staff as we paddle our canoe with the message of Good Governance during a very challenging time for the Kingdom. (c)OMBTonga.

Below: The Principal Investigation Officer, Mr. Pilimiso Tamo'ua (l) and the Director of Investigation, Mr. Roman Vaihū, at one of the Talkback programs, held on Friday, 18th March, and was simulcast over Radio Tonga 1 and 2.



Staff recruitment - The Office has recruited Mr. 'Etivoni Pifeleti (*below*) to the post of Investigation Officer, effective from early March. Mr. Pifeleti, LLB, joins the Investigation Division.



The seven (7) principles of Good Governance being promoted to guide the services and administrative decisions of the government are the—Rule of Law, Independence, Integrity, Transparency, Effective and Efficient, Accountability & Clarity of Purpose.

For more information, call us toll-free on 0800 662 or email—investigation@ombudsman.to or reach us via Facebook Messenger on our page—Office of the Ombudsman.

Our website is www.ombudsman.to.

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