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news

Covid-19: Cook Islands investigating 'persons of interest' on Air NZ flight and more than 100 recent arrivals

Lorna Thornber · 15:06, Jun 24 2021

BREAKFAST

Bookings are required due to high demand in the wake of an Australian tourist's visit.

The Cook Islands health ministry says it [removed 13 Wellington passengers](#) from a flight to

Rarotonga on Thursday morning to give itself more time to assess the Covid-19 situation in the New Zealand capital.

Te Marae Ora Cook Islands Ministry of Health (TMO), said in a statement that it used contact details supplied on the online form that must be filled out by all visitors to identify “persons of interest” on the Air New Zealand flight from Auckland.

RICKY WILSON/STUFF

Thirteen passengers were offloaded from a Thursday flight from Auckland to Rarotonga.

“Persons of interest” were deemed to be those who had either started their journey in Wellington or were in the capital on Saturday June 19.

Tepaeru Herrmann, chair of the Cook Islands Border Easement Taskforce, said the last-minute decision to offload these passengers was “a testament to our systems and processes doing what they have been designed to do in providing additional layers of protection to the Cook Islands”.

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“It should be noted the situation in Wellington is still evolving, and this pause in arrival for persons of interest will allow us invaluable time to observe and assess the situation in Wellington, New Zealand, which ultimately impacts on our own risk profile and primary objective to prevent the arrival of Covid-19 to the Cook Islands.”

TMO plans to investigate each offloaded passenger’s movements in Wellington before deciding whether to let them into the country.

MONIQUE FORD/STUFF

The Cook Islands health ministry is investigating more than 114 New Zealanders who arrived in the country from Wellington on previous flights.

In the meantime, the ministry will continue to contact trace, interview and, if necessary, isolate 114 passengers who arrived in Rarotonga from Wellington on earlier flights.

TMO secretary Bob Williams urged offloaded passengers to re-book on the next available flight, saying this will give the ministry time to “determine their risk profile”.

The ministry said it would contact impacted travellers directly by the end of the day.

Air New Zealand has told affected passengers to sort out the problem with Rarotongan immigration authorities themselves.

Covid-19 Minister Chris Hipkins said the Cook Islands travel bubble is “still open at this point”. Asked whether that was appropriate, he said: “That’s a decision for the Cook Islands Government.”

Cook Islands Tourism general manager for New Zealand and Australia Graeme West said the Cook Islands Government would meet Thursday afternoon to discuss the situation.

TMO spokesperson Jaewynn McKay was reported as saying extra precautions would be taken at Rarotonga Airport, and the ministry would be conducting risk assessments of passengers.

Wellington [moved to Covid-19 alert level 2](#) on Wednesday after a Sydney tourist who spent the weekend in the capital was found to have tested positive for Covid-19.

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