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MFAT confirms New Zealand as likely source of Samoa's measles epidemic

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P. **The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) has confirmed New Zealand as the likely source of Samoa's measles epidemic, compounding its responsibility for the disease's arrival.**



The Samoan government reported the first case of measles arrived from New Zealand in late August, according to an MFAT spokesperson. Photo: RNZ / Logan Church

Measles has killed 72 people in Samoa since October, in a deadly catastrophe that has highlighted the country's low vaccination rates - just 16 percent had both doses of the measles vaccine last year - and the influence of a growing anti-vaccination movement there.

But critics have also blamed New Zealand for the epidemic.

Samoa's Prime Minister, Tuila'epa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi, and senior health officials have maintained measles travelled to Samoa from New Zealand.

In at least one instance, Tui'laepa has used this to argue Samoa could not have done more to prepare itself for the disease's arrival.

The Samoan government reported the first case arrived from New Zealand in late August, according to an MFAT spokesperson.

"International travel means that measles can spread quickly from country to country. It is highly likely that New Zealand is the main source for the outbreak in Samoa," the spokesperson said.

The comments are the first public admission of responsibility for the epidemic, after New Zealand government ministers either evaded questions on where the disease came from or outright denied New Zealand was the source.

When *Checkpoint's* Lisa Owen asked Foreign Affairs Minister Winston Peters, earlier this month whether New Zealand gave Samoa measles, he said: "That is speculation, the answer is most probably not."

More medical support

On Friday afternoon, Peters announced further medical support to assist with Samoa's measles epidemic.

Peters said Samoa's health system had experienced a massive strain, and its health workers were facing exhaustion as they dealt with the number of patients needing care.

More than 5000 measles cases have been reported in Samoa since the outbreak began in mid-October, and scores of infected people remain in hospital.

Peters said more New Zealand medical specialists will travel to Samoa, providing support where needed.

The assistance includes Samoan-speaking medical personnel and trauma support, a Samoan-speaking biomedical engineer, up to four anaesthetists, and funding for a new oxygen generation