

Australia restricts travel to indigenous areas over virus fears

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Australia moved to lock down isolated indigenous areas on Friday, in a bid to protect Aboriginal communities already burdened with chronic illness and poverty from the fast-spreading coronavirus.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced travel restrictions "into remote indigenous communities" were being introduced as the number of COVID-19 cases in the country neared 900.

Most infections have so far been detected in urban areas.

The move to protect indigenous populations could pave the way for the vast Northern Territory and other areas to be cut off from the rest of the country.

Health experts have warned that high rates of chronic illness, overcrowded housing and poor access to medical facilities in remote indigenous communities could exacerbate the impact of the virus.

"Just an extraordinary high number of people have diabetes and have had a heart attack or stroke, things like that," Jason Agostino, a medical adviser for the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, told AFP.

"We know that particularly people that have had a heart attack and stroke, from the data from China suggests that, they're at the highest risk."

Earlier this week a South Australian indigenous council announced they were restricting access for outside visitors in a bid to protect the community from the virus.

The council also encouraged locals to remain home, a move mirrored in indigenous centres around the country.

Research suggests the outbreak of Swine Flu in 2009 impacted indigenous Australians much harder than the rest of the country, with three times more Aboriginal people hospitalised with the disease.

Life expectancy for Aboriginal Australians is about eight years lower than the national average.

Indigenous children are twice as likely to die before their fifth birthday, according to official statistics.

The government's announcement stopped short of calling in army medical teams, a move urged by some Aboriginal health groups.

The extreme isolation of some communities made it particularly hard to combat the disease, Agostino said.

"We're talking hundreds of kilometres from the nearest hospital and days until we even get the results of the COVID tests, with some people we're talking about more than a week to get a result," he said.

Many indigenous Australians also live in overcrowded housing where self-isolation was not possible, he added.

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