

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: FRIDAY, 5 MARCH 2021
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT

PM: Kia ora koutou katoa. Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou. Thank you for joining us this afternoon. This morning, as I walked into the Beehive bunker, where we undertake our civil defence emergency coordination, two things struck me: first, that it's hard not to feel like our country is having a run of bad luck, when you have an earthquake, tsunami alert, and pandemic to contend with all in one day. But, secondly, as I walked down the stairs into the bunker, there are images on the panels of our past natural disasters in New Zealand. We have had our share of tough moments in this country, but within that we have always been blessed with incredible people who work in our emergency system, and I include in that our civil defence response teams nationally and locally, and to them I say thank you for your work. I include in that our current Minister for Emergency Management, Kiritapu Allan, who'll I now ask to give an update. At the conclusion of that update, I'll ask Dr Bloomfield to take the podium, we'll run through the COVID announcements, we'll then take COVID questions, and then we'll bring Minister Allan back up for any remaining questions on events today. Minister Allan.

Hon Kiritapu Allan: Tenā koe, Prime Minister.

[Authorised te reo text to be inserted by the Hansard Office.]

[Authorised translation to be inserted by the Hansard Office.]

As you're all aware, there have been multiple earthquakes and aftershocks over the last 12 hours. Commencing earlier this morning at around 2.30, we had the first earthquake, of 7.3 magnitude, just off the East Coast of the North Island. The second was a 7.4 earthquake near the Kermadec Islands at 6.41 a.m., and the third was a magnitude 8.1 earthquake, again, near the Kermadec Islands, at 8.28 a.m. A tsunami was generated, with the first waves reaching Aotearoa in the areas around Lottin Point near Hicks Bay. At the time of the earthquake events, the National Emergency Management Agency had already activated the national coordination centre here due to the COVID-19 resurgence. Additional resources were brought in to respond to this tsunami event in the early hours.

I want to say thank you to all of those that did exactly the right thing, from those that got into their trucks at 2.35 a.m. when they felt that long earthquake, when they felt that strong earthquake, and they knew to head into the highlands. I want to thank those men and women up and down the country who give their service every time there is an incident of such gravity, that took to the street to look after our community. And, as the Prime Minister has just acknowledged, the men and women who have been engaged in the civil defence process, we take our hats off to you all.

Finally, I just want to make a note of the role that the media has played over the course of today in terms of conveying messaging to those that have been most impacted. This has been a significant event for all of Aotearoa, and the communications that have been distributed by all of you have been outstanding and we want to acknowledge that.

We will have time for some questions about the events over the course of the day after the briefing, but I do want to just finally note at quarter to 4 today, NIWA issued a cancellation of the tsunami warnings across the country. That means now that people can return home. I guess we say this with one note of caution. Whilst there is no longer the restrictions on being able to go down on to the beach, please do exercise prudent judgment. We are asking people still to take care. So I'll leave the rest to the Prime Minister.

PM: Thank you, Minister Allan, and we'll bring Minister Allan up at the conclusion of the COVID briefing. I'll now ask Dr Bloomfield to take the stage.

This morning, I spoke with President Macron of France. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss progress and the forward agenda for the Christchurch Call ahead of the two-year anniversary of the March 15 terror attacks. But as you can imagine, international calls at

present inevitably turn to COVID-19. It reminded me of what those in other countries are going through. Yesterday alone, I'm advised, there were 26,788 new cases reported in France and 322 deaths. I know here in New Zealand we take none of what we have for granted, not least because so many of us know people or have people that we love abroad, and while I absolutely maintain that our strategy of elimination is best for us, that does not make it easy. This week, I received a letter from a mum who was distraught that she had to tell her daughter there would be no school camp, and that sits alongside stories of job loss and hardship of small businesses, hospitality outlets, and tourism operators feeling the effects of another setback. COVID has taken a toll on so many in so many ways, but it will get better.

Over the next few weeks, I'll set out more of a road map for what the year ahead looks like for Aotearoa and how vaccines will affect our elimination strategy, particularly as we get more certainty around vaccine delivery. But until then, we have some cases to recap and important decisions and alert levels to make.

A brief reminder of how we got to where we are today: on Valentine's Day, we learnt of two COVID cases in a family in Auckland, the origin of which at that point was unknown. Cabinet, with the advice from Health, moved Auckland into level 3 for three days and the rest of the country to level 2 while we worked to gather a complete picture of the infection and spread. Within three days, we were confident our response was the right one. We had cases in the community, but they were manageable via contact tracing and testing procedures, and we knew there wasn't widespread transmission. Because we're dealing with the uncertainty of the more transmissible UK strain, we were more cautious, treating more people as if they were close contacts. As a result, we came out of those higher alert levels after a short, sharp three days.

Ten days later, on Saturday 27th, a new case emerged that we could not immediately link. The position Cabinet found itself in last Saturday was fairly clear-cut: there was no immediate link for the new case, and even if there had been, there were a large number of exposure events which posed a significant risk of spread, so Ministers once again opted for the cautious approach that has served New Zealand so well. Since that time, 50,239 COVID tests have been carried out. Importantly, a significant proportion of those tests have been in Auckland.

Thank you to everyone who got a test over the past week. It's only by doing so that we know whether we have COVID more widely in the community.

Meanwhile, since Valentine's Day, in relation to the cluster of 15 cases, we have identified and managed roughly 6,000 contacts. We've genomically linked all 15 cases, which means we're confident there is just one cluster. We've carried out regular waste water testing at key sites, the results of which have all been negative, with the exception of the site near the Jet Park, which you would expect to test positive. And since 14 February, we've seen a 58 percent jump in the use of the COVID Tracer app across the country—we just need to keep that number up. That's a massive credit to everyone and a hugely important contribution to our contact tracing efforts, should we need them if we have a positive case.

There've been no new cases for five days in a row. That is good news, especially when we are dealing with what I can only describe as an unpredictable variant of COVID-19, one that everyone has been wise to be cautious of. Level 3 provided us with an extra layer of security while we addressed the unknowns and reduced risk.

On the basis that we've found no new cases beyond household members, we've had excellent testing numbers, and that close contacts continue to be managed, Cabinet has made the decision to move Auckland to alert level 2 at 6 a.m. on Sunday, and the rest of New Zealand to level 1 at 6 a.m. on Sunday. So that brings us to the conclusion of the seven days that we set out from the very beginning. Cabinet will review this decision at the end of next week, with a view to moving Auckland to level 1 at the start of the weekend, if we are in a position to do so. This plan is consistent with our cautious and careful elimination strategy.

Now, being at level 2 for this period will carry us through to roughly 14 days since the infectious period for our last cases in the community. There is of course the chance that we'll

see additional cases, and that's why we continue to place requirements on those who still to be in isolation and it's also why we are at level 2 in Auckland.

Although compared to level 3, level 2 feels more like normal life, it is still not business as usual. Please keep your distance from other people when out in public, including on public transport, and if you can't maintain a physical distance of 2 metres, we do encourage you to carry a face mask or face covering with you. If you are sick, stay at home. Don't go to work or school and don't socialise—this protects you and it protects your whānau. If you have symptoms of a cold or flu nature, if you have aches and pains, call your doctor or Healthline and get a test, and keep track of where you've been at all times. We know that gatherings pose the biggest risk of spread, so there can be no more than 100 people at social events, including weddings, birthdays, funerals, tangis, and other church services. So just a reminder: we're moving to level 2 on a Sunday morning; the restriction on 100 will apply to church services.

Businesses can reopen, but must follow public health rules, including physical distancing, record keeping, and a cap on 100 people. Hospitality venues can open, but must apply those three S's—you'll remember that we ask people to be seated, single servers, and having people spaced between tables. For any other level 2 reminders, please visit [COVID19.govt.nz](https://www.covid19.govt.nz).

Finally, we may not be in the devastating position the rest of the world finds itself in, but an elimination strategy can still feel like hard work, and it is completely natural to feel fatigued. COVID is hard work for everyone. Thank you for pushing through once again, and we are confident that we will once again get ourselves back to a position where we have the freedoms New Zealand has so enjoyed.

Dr Bloomfield.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Thank you, Prime Minister. Kia ora koutou katoa. As the Prime Minister has mentioned, there are no new positive COVID-19 cases in the community for the fifth day in a row. There are also no positive cases in managed isolation to report today.

Over the past few weeks, roughly 6,000 people connected to this February cluster have been contacted by staff from Auckland Regional Public Health service, our public health units around the country, or our national contact tracing centre staff. They've been provided with advice and information on testing and self-isolation. Many of these people have been followed up on a daily basis and their testing results carefully matched to support our control of this outbreak. This is an incredible effort, and I would like to acknowledge the hard work of our public health, our contact tracing teams, and our Healthline staff, who have been putting in very long hours and have scaled up the approach and response to this more transmissible variant.

Local public health officials, contact tracers, and interpreters have also worked closely with other agencies and organisations to provide outreach and support to communities and individuals, including those from different ethnic and language backgrounds. Remarkable and rapid progress has been made, and we would like to acknowledge and thank in particular the Papatoetoe High School community. All of the outstanding Papatoetoe students have been contacted and retested, and all have returned negative results. There are two students who are in isolation because they were unwilling to get a test. They are being carefully followed up and supported by public health officials.

Despite the decision to lower the alert levels on Sunday, as the Prime Minister has said, we want people who are unwell to continue to be tested wherever you are in the country. It is possible we may still get positive results from some of the contacts who remain in isolation and are still to have day 12 tests. It's important to note these people do remain in isolation. A positive test result does not present a risk to the wider community. Our contact tracing and public health staff are in contact with them daily.

As we move down alert levels this weekend, some people, as I said, will still be required to remain in isolation and/or be tested. To underscore the importance of them following the

advice they have been given by the public health unit or by our contact tracing team, I am issuing a direction under section 70 of the Health Act 1956 that applies to the following people: any person who attended the City Fitness gym at Hunters Plaza, at 217 Great South Road, Papatoetoe, in Auckland, on 20 February 2021 between 11.15 a.m. and 1.45 p.m., or on 26 February 2021 between 3.25 p.m. and 4.30 p.m.; as well, any other person who has already been contacted by Auckland Regional Public Health service or our contact tracing teams and advised they are a close plus, a close, or a casual plus contact during this outbreak and who is still required to isolate and/or be tested to comply with the following instructions.

I require them to do three things: to isolate at their usual home—first—second, to report for and undergo medical testing for COVID-19 at a time and place specified by a medical officer of health; and, third, except as required to undergo such testing, to remain isolated until they receive further direction from a medical officer of health.

Now, a section 70 order enables an authorised medical officer of health to require those, in order to meet public health requirements, to undergo testing, to isolate until they receive their results. It also enables those affected to be visited immediately at their homes or at work by public health officials. Any time a person receives a direction from a medical officer of health, they must comply with it, and of course public health officials will also discuss with these people the support that they require and which is available to help them meet these requirements.

Thank you, Prime Minister.

PM: Thank you, Dr Bloomfield. Happy to take questions—Jessica?

Media: Prime Minister, if you're comfortable with the zero cases over five days and the fact there are these extra restrictions on people who went to the gym, why not go to level 2 for Auckland at midnight tonight?

PM: Look, a good question. One of the things, of course, that we have kept in mind all the way through is that we still actually had the remainder of a transmission cycle, and so our judgment has been that, actually, that full seven days—you know, that gives the chance of the majority of any positive infections to be manifest. The second half, you're always less likely to see them in that latter part, but we still want some level of restriction and caution in place if we are in a position where we identify cases in that period. So there's always a judgment there. In our view, sticking with that full seven days was the wise approach to take.

Media: You were still waiting for those 74 tests back yesterday. How many of those have come back and are included in those zero cases?

PM: Dr Bloomfield.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So the vast majority. There are still around 10 people who we don't have results back yet, from the original gym visit on 20 February and the following one on the 26 February. Eight of those people have either had tests or are in the process of being tested today. They have all been in regular, daily contact and have been isolating. There are just two people who our finding services have been unable to find through remote contact, and police and customs don't have other contact details for them. So the teams are on the ground just looking for those two people.

Media: So those two people might be—

PM: On those last two, Dr Bloomfield reminded Cabinet this afternoon that those two are from the visit on 20 February, rather than the later visit—

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yes.

PM: —and so I understand that gives a different—

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yes. So the earlier visit is one we're less concerned about because it was before the person became symptomatic. So what I can say is all the people from that visit on 26 February, which was last Friday afternoon, have either been tested, or the team is out there testing them now and they are in isolation.

PM: Dr Bloomfield, perhaps you'd want to speak to what's going to happen with the two people from the 20th that we've been working hard to find?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So they will be found, and they will be isolated and tested, and they will remain isolated until they receive their test result.

Media: The response this time with the section 70 Health Act—was that because the communications weren't clear enough last time and they are crystal clear this time?

PM: The one thing I would add is that in the stand-up last time, there were references to different people being treated differently through alert levels. But I'll let Dr Bloomfield—

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So yes, it does make it very crystal clear to everybody—including everyone listening—that there is a formal legal requirement for people to do as requested. What I should say is that it's also just—as we move down from alert level 3 to 2, where people are staying at home anyway under alert level 3, it's just to make sure there is a specific legal requirement for those people who are still required to be at home to remain so.

PM: Let's be clear: of course, we never make an assumption that everyone affected by a section 70 is tuning in immediately for every press conference, so this is one thing we can do. That doesn't take away from the obligation for us to try and get that communication out in as many ways as possible.

Media: Can we expect to see more section 70 orders if there are further outbreaks earlier on than—

PM: I'll have Dr Bloomfield—it's not the only—this idea that we can only require someone to do something if there's a section 70 isn't quite right. So I'll have Dr Bloomfield explain his powers.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yes, and I was discussing this with the Solicitor-General earlier today—thank you—

PM: Just stick with the legal ones. There's many you could choose to speak to, of course.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Here's the key point: actually, as I've said the last few days, the medical officers of health and, indeed, health protection officers are designated officers under the Health Act. I actually give them their designation, so they have powers that they can use. But the vast majority of work carried out by our public health units, whether it relates to pandemic response or a food-borne illness outbreak, they do, because they have those delegated powers. If they need to, they can use section 70 to require people to do things. That doesn't even need to be a written, gazetted notice; just simply saying it to someone: "Under section 70, I require you to do these things." provides a formal legal basis, if they are required to do that. But as we've seen in this outbreak, for the vast majority of people, that is not required, and in a sense, given we've got all of these people—they are in daily contact—I'm confident they will do what's asked. We're just making that clear without any—that there's no doubt that is an expectation and requirement on them.

Media: But as a communications strategy, are you likely to employ this more often?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: It's not so much a part of the communications strategy, because, indeed, even the requirements that went out to the school community through each of the letters that went out—because they had been asked to do that by a medical officer of health, that was, in a sense, a legal requirement that was on—that underpinned the expectation on the school community, and, as we saw, the vast majority of people wouldn't have known even if there was a section 70 notice in place. They were asked to do it to help control the pandemic, and that certainly helped.

PM: I think if we just take a step back, you know, the general provisions we've worked through and operated by here in New Zealand over the past year are, by and large, very well-understood, and some of the issues that we've experienced very recently have actually been

things like breaches of level 3 requirements, which are generally very well-understood. What we want to make sure is that we are providing every opportunity to share as much information about the requirements on particular people, especially if they may have been in a place where there's been potential contact with a COVID positive case.

Media: Do you regret any of the comments you made about the various cases and the rule-breaking over the last seven days, or are you totally comfortable with them?

PM: No, I've consistently stood by what I've said and I will continue to do so. However, I did also say earlier in the week that not at any point have I been under the view that anyone has done anything deliberately. I do not believe that. I don't think anyone's deliberately gone out to act against advice or instructions or to create the situation we're in. I don't believe that for a moment, which is one of the reasons I haven't seen merit in continuing a back and forth on some of the particular cases.

Media: The pandemic is, obviously, just such a new environment. Everything is evolving and we're learning all the time. This lockdown feels very frustrating because it could have been avoidable—like, we've had breaches of rules, we've had communications issues, there's been contact tracing issues. So what have you learnt from this lockdown in particular?

PM: Well, actually, one of the things I'd reflect on is—and I've said this for the last couple of days—we have never had a scenario through our COVID-19 response, which—by and large, as a country, the team has done exceptionally well, but we've never had an experience that's been perfect. So in August, we had some quite significant breaches—relatively widespread ones. They weren't always canvassed in as much detail. In part, it was probably because it was larger. There wasn't so much focus on individual cases., and so the point I've always tried to make is that as a team, we've gotten through all of those scenarios too, and we will continue to do so. But the most important principles for our COVID management have been: sticking together; people supporting one another, not turning on one another; and making sure that we're reminding everyone of those basic rules and principles, even if the variants we're dealing with change up around the edges what we need to do.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Prime Minister, could I make a comment—

PM: Yeah, go ahead.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: —there as well. This is an outbreak in the South Auckland community. The last time this happened, we had 170 cases—last August. This time we've had 15, and I tend to be a glass half-full person, but in this case I think it's 98 percent full. This community has responded, and the school in particular—this is a large college. The reason we have got around this outbreak so quickly and successfully is because of the way the community responded, and I really hope we can focus on that. It was the quality of the communication and leadership within the school and the positive response of the vast majority of people in that community, and even those who may not have followed instructions I don't believe deliberately set out to actually cause any problems.

Media: Prime Minister, with Auckland going down to level 2 at 6 o'clock Sunday morning, many of our Pasifika community will be wanting to get to church to praise God. They have got to stay under 100. Will the police be able to help—will you have the police—

PM: I think—certainly what we'll be asking, you know, all of our community leaders, and certainly this is something our ministers have worked really hard on. They've got really good community contacts now; they can very quickly communicate information. We'll be wanting to convey that, yes, those meetings will be—you know, congregations will be able to come together, but that limit of a hundred is really important, and contact tracing is really important.

We have had experiences in the past where it hasn't always been easy to contact trace in congregations. So we'll be getting that message out to our church leaders: please make sure when you gather, you do so safely, and we're here to support you in any way we can.

Media: With all of the benefit of hindsight, do you still believe it was the right decision to pull Auckland out of lockdown after that three-day Valentine's lockdown?

PM: Yeah.

Media: Would you do it differently this time around, knowing what you know?

PM: Oh, well, actually, no. I absolutely feel that that was still the right response, because if you look back at what happened, unfortunately, the breach that occurred that set off a chain of events, albeit not a deliberate one, actually happened under level 3. So we were right to be in that precautionary period at that time. It's just unfortunate that we had a breach; we then didn't have a disclosure to contact tracing, and it went from there.

Media: And I just want to make it clear: are you going to apologise to case L?

PM: Again, as I've said, look, while I stand by what I've said, I've never believed and never ever claimed that anything has been deliberate here, and nor have I ever wanted to see a pile-in on anyone. I've always said we need to create an environment where people feel they can come through and get tested, because we rely on that.

Media: You seem to be doing a bit of reviewing already and thinking about the lessons that could be learnt. So is an obvious one from this, going back to, I guess, when people—the 24-hour period if you don't have people that you need and they're not being contacted, going and sending someone out and knocking on a door?

PM: Well look, just in reference to the review, as you call it—look, we constantly, after every single event that we have that relates to COVID, go back and say, "What in that could have potentially been preventable?", and so we'll do that again. We've already done it in part as we've been going through: "Are there things that we can do?" Dr Bloomfield didn't reference this, but there have been welfare checks going on, so there have been door-to-door checking in some cases. That gives us the chance to check people have what they need, but it also gives us a chance to check that people are there.

Media: But I'm not really talking about welfare checks—I mean, we've talked about this, I think, on Wednesday, when Minister Hipkins was with you, Dr Bloomfield, and, you know, there were people that were really difficult to track down for some days. At that stage, you were saying, no, you hadn't got to the review part, but it seems as if you are starting to get to there. So does it not make sense that if you can't track people down and we've got a live community cluster, going and knocking on people's doors and finding them—is that not an obvious thing to implement?

PM: No, that is—absolutely. You would have heard Dr Bloomfield already talked about his communication with Commissioner Coster to say, if we get to that point, that's when we need the support of the police.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yeah, it's already part of the protocols, and I think what we'll do and reflect is: at what point we might sort of engage our teams to go out and look and find people—just remembering, if we go back to that first week, when we had by the end of that weekend, before the school reopened—as I used the 98 percent figure—98 percent of students had been tested. There was a safety net that no one could go back to school before they were tested, and that was the time that the teams were starting to go out and find people who hadn't yet been tested. And we found that one of those actually—the young girl who did go and get tested because she was symptomatic, that's how we found about the case. But, yes, we will look and see, remembering, again, there were 1,400 to 1,500 people being followed up with repeated phone calls, different phone numbers—at what point in time do we activate the teams to go out and look?

Media: Prime Minister, on the—

PM: Keeping in mind the TV—I'll come and—

Media: On Australia having their exports of AstraZeneca blocked, how concerning is that, and what impact will that have on us?

PM: That is concerning, and, look, I took the opportunity during the course of the conversation with President Macron of France today—as, obviously, a critical member within

the EU—to raise New Zealand’s deep concerns over the fact that Australia’s vaccines were being blocked from being exported to them, you know, and that came from a position of principle—you know, we don’t believe that Australia should be put in that position, and also from the principle of now is not the time for there to be acts of protectionism, when, ultimately, countries are often trying to do the right thing by making sure that everyone is getting their fair share.

Media: And what was his response to that?

PM: Look, this is obviously, you know, a deeply entrenched issue between the EU commission and AstraZeneca. They feel that—and this has been canvassed publicly. The commission feel that the contracts haven’t been upheld. You know, certainly New Zealand’s view would be there has always been uncertainty around the delivery timetable for vaccines that have been developed and then produced across the globe. We have all worn the fact that we won’t have a lot of certainty, so I don’t think it’s reasonable to then block exports on the basis of contractual obligation.

Media: [*Inaudible*] AstraZeneca, are you expecting it to be manufactured in Europe or actually manufactured in Australia?

PM: That’s not something that has been identified for us. These are decisions that are made by AstraZeneca, and that’s not something they have flagged with us at this point. But that’s not the only reason we’ve raised it. This is a matter of—we haven’t raised it necessarily because we fear for our own orders; we’ve raised it because it is a matter of principle. We don’t think the situation Australia is being left in is fair, and it’s a matter of solidarity for us. You know, it’s important that we stand alongside Australia on this one.

Media: On the wage subsidy for a colleague: why does it require businesses to compare their revenue decline to January and February when that time is still impacted by COVID? Why not compare it to the same time last year or the year before?

PM: So that’s what we’ve put in place for the payments to try and identify, and also get beyond the immediate period we’ve just had, which has been disrupted. So you wouldn’t want to necessarily confine a business to making an assessment over the past month, because they may already be starting from a low base. So it’s a matter of trying to identify a period where it would be slightly closer to what their normal trading would be.

Media: And just on your chat with President Macron, you talked about the Christchurch Call, and obviously March 15 is coming up. Can you just elaborate a bit on what you’ve discussed with the President?

PM: Yeah, well, as the anniversary comes around, we do want to make sure that we’re giving extra focus to certain elements of the call where we want to see more progress. One of the priorities for me, in particular, is continuing to see more work on the algorithms, because that has been an area that I think we have potential to deal with some of the preventative issues and what it is that is driving people to particular content that is dangerous—you know, that is promoting violent and extremist activity. And so really a chance for us to say: what are the next steps for us, where have we succeeded, where does more work need to be done, who else do we want to bring on board?

We’ll canvass around a little here.

Media: The applications opened yesterday for the resurgence payments and the new wage subsidy. Do you have any recent figures on how many businesses have applied?

PM: Unfortunately, no. But I’m pretty sure we can get those to you in fairly short order. So the resurgence payment, obviously, has been running for a longer period, from the previous change in alert levels. Applications have only been accepted for the wage subsidy since Thursday, and we’ll be looking to start processing payments from the Monday.

Media: Is there any initial reaction or feedback you have?

PM: I would need to check. Certainly, on the resurgence payment, I have heard numbers on that, but I wouldn't want to just give you a recollection, because it's a few days old. So let me try and get updated numbers.

And then I'll come over to you.

Media: You said at the start that Cabinet hopes to move Auckland to level 1 next week. In what situation would that not happen?

PM: Oh, the same as what we've always outlined. Of course, we haven't said that it's the case that if we get new cases that will stop us; it all depends very much on the context. If we're seeing them within identified contacts—people who we've already asked to be isolating—then that would not necessarily stand in the way of a change of alert level. But we always keep it under advisement. So you'll get a sense, as we're on the podium, as to whether we have any concerns.

Media: There have been some reports of a pretty large breach of the level 3 rules in Auckland University accommodation last night, with a fire evacuation. Just wondering if you have any specific guidelines for managing level 3 bubbles in university accommodation and whether or not they'll be updated following this experience?

PM: Actually, I can't speak specifically to that event, but I know that actually the Ministry of Education did some excellent work early on with tertiary institutions around how they would operate under the different alert levels. I would need to go back and check that that framework covered off things like an evacuation—I would imagine it would—so it may just be that they didn't execute their plans. What I will do is ask the Minister for COVID-19 Response and the Minister of Education to compare the notes from our MIQ protocols, because we have to develop protocols on what do we do if we evacuate people who are already at risk of having COVID. There'll be some clear things that will be helpful to share with university accommodation.

Media: Can I just draw you on the gutting news that a new man has been arrested in relation to online threats to the two Christchurch mosques? Muslim leaders have described that as disturbing and unsettling, but they're not shocked by it at all, so—I mean, what was your response when you learnt that news, and how will you guarantee that next week's commemoration of the terrorism attacks will be safe for all to attend?

PM: It has been on our minds for every event around 15 March that we have to make sure that it does not become an opportunity for anyone to create an unsafe environment for our community, to target our community. So, very unfortunately, we've had to be mindful of that the entire time since 15 March. However, I'm sure that most New Zealanders would be shocked to think and to hear, again, evidence that there are individuals who continue to target our Muslim community in New Zealand after all they have been through. But, sadly, they will also say that it is unlikely to surprise them, and that in itself is devastating. On the case itself, because of the process it's going through, I can't say anything more specific on it.

Media: That threat's been online, though, for at least a couple of days before it was drawn to police attention. Can more be done?

PM: I'll step back a little bit from the current case and just talk more generally. One of the things that the community has been raising with the police is, you know, even if a criminal threshold isn't met, what can be done, because often when the community will raise these issues directly with the platforms where those messages are being posted, sometimes nothing will happen. There has to be a better way to respond to those things that may not reach a criminal threshold—speaking aside from this current issue—but are none the less leaving our community feeling very, very vulnerable.

Media: What about those attending those events, and reassurances about safety—should they go or stay at home?

PM: Oh look, so, you know, without going into too much detail, you know, every large-scale event around 15 March, of course there is a significant amount of work that goes into

the preparation of those at every level, and, sadly, it's because we have to be mindful of the security of all those who may attend. So that is not new for our police and our agencies.

Media: Minister Little said that police and intelligence agencies can't be expected to be aware of everything on the internet that might be threatening or offensive in this manner. But this is a very prominent site, well-known for containing this sort of content. Shouldn't police and intelligence agencies have been able to identify it on their own without—

PM: And that's getting a little bit too close to a case that is now under the scrutiny of the law, so I might park that one. But, generally, as I've just said, under the response to March 15, this is one of the issues that through the royal commission process, the community is raising with us, and, in fact, the police have identified as an issue. They know that they need to be able to provide a response even if we're in a position where sometimes a criminal threshold hasn't been met, but we have a community who are feeling vulnerable as a result.

Media: On the undeclared lodger, can you give us more details about that and whether that factored into the decision today?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yes, the lodger at the family—yep, so this was someone who is on the property of the latest family, lives in a sleep-out, identified himself to Healthline on last weekend. He was given advice from Auckland regional public health staff at the time, who contacted his employer, let his employer know. He was isolating in place with daily support from Auckland regional public health, had returned a negative test, but actually now has opted to also go into the quarantine facility for the balance of his isolation period and for his second test.

PM: Yeah, I'm going to try and just take an—can I get an indication: are there questions around the tsunami and events this morning for Minister Allan? You do. OK, so I'll just take a couple more, and then we'll bring Minister Allan up.

Media: Just going back to Mark's question before, there have been previous examples of similar threats being made on channels like 4chan, and considering what Minister Little did say today, would you like to see more focus from the security agencies on websites like 4chan, considering we've seen repeated examples of threats towards—

PM: Yeah, I think, just to—and what I'm saying I don't believe is any different than Mr Little in respect of—sometimes people's assumption's that our security agencies see absolutely everything at all times. They don't—no security agency in the world does. But of course we have to be concerned over, you know, threats, regardless of the platform, that are made very directly, very overtly, towards members of any community. What probably is one of the other issues, though, we need to tackle alongside that is raised frequently from the community, is just, when it's identified, whether or not we have an adequate response. If it's a criminal threshold it's a bit different, but at the moment one of the gaps seems to be what happens if it drops below that, and that's where there's a real ongoing problem.

I did promise I'd come over here—Justin.

Media: With at least two students who declined tests—in MIQ, when someone declined a test they were kept for nearly a month.

PM: You stay in isolation for longer.

Media: Can you describe in kind of greater detail what the public health plan is and what's happening to them?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So it would be a requirement for them to remain in isolation with daily follow-up and symptom checks until the medical officers of health was satisfied that the likelihood they were incubating an infection had passed. And so if they develop symptoms, of course they will then be required to be tested, but at the moment they are just remaining in isolation with supervision.

Media: And at the start of this week we were pretty much—the country was warned that there would be more community cases. There haven't been in five days. Is that miraculous? Are you surprised?

PM: I referred to it as unpredictable.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: It is unpredictable, and I think this has been a characteristic of this outbreak. In many respects we've had less cases than we might have expected with this variant, and for the most part it's been very predictable—high transmission rates within households, but then a very unpredictable case amongst a casual contact at the school. So that unpredictability has continued, but I think it's reassuring that there haven't been any more cases. And, I might also add, it also reflects the work that went on last week from our contact tracers to really go out wide, and it was a lot of work to follow up those many thousands of people, including a couple of thousand as if they were close contacts. But that certainly helped with us being able to get around the outbreak quickly.

PM: OK, I'm going to finish by giving the update on some of the numbers I've just had come through on resurgence payment. As of 9 a.m. on 5 March, for the resurgence payment, we've had 32,625 applications received. The total amount applied for has been \$88.4 million. Disburse to date: \$63.68 million. Wage subsidy: we had 10,000 applications in the first four hours. Just keep in mind, though, the resurgence payment did cover off that period from those first alert level moves, and the wage subsidy we look to start processing from Monday of next week.

Dr Bloomfield, thank you very much for your time. Minister Allan, I'll just bring you back up. We'll see if we've got any more questions on the tsunami update. Sorry—Jessica, did I have you? A tsunami question?

Media: Can you just give us an update on why you decided to call off that—to cancel the alert level at 3.45 this afternoon? Why did it take so long after the surge that we saw?

Hon Kiritapu Allan: Yeah, as previously advised earlier today, this has been an ongoing situation that has been under constant monitoring since the three earthquakes earlier this morning. So GNS have been working very closely to monitor the science, and the call was around when it was—the timing about, first of all, management of risk to life—and those calls at the time that they deemed that was appropriate, that there was no longer a risk to life, we could de-escalate and the call was made to cancel the notice.

Media: Overall, how do you think today's alert system went? And, in particular, residents of Napier didn't receive an alert and evacuated themselves. Should there have been an alert for them?

PM: So just to be clear, the emergency management alert system!

Hon Kiritapu Allan: Yeah, that's right—we're talking about two sets of alerts, unfortunately, today. Look, so in its totality, I think from the way that the system has operated, we had that first initial earthquake at around 2.30 this morning, we had the last one just before 9 o'clock, which was the 8.0—they were disconnected—and then we've had the monitoring throughout the course of the day, what we've seen. One part of the emergency management system notification system is the alert messages that you receive on your cellphone. Those are strictly targeted and have been targeted, again, based on the science available as to those that were most at risk of losing life—risk to life. So that was not to be a carte blanche notification to all.

Also, though, as a really important part of the messaging and communication for the system in its totality is the role that CDEM plays throughout the course of the day—so on the civil defence website, the role that the media plays in terms of getting those messages out. So when we step back and look at the system as a whole, are we satisfied that people knew what to do at the critical times and that, ultimately, they could stay safe? I think, in the round, the answer is yes. Of course, though, we will—like we do for all events—undertake a review to stress test the events of today. It was a unique set of circumstances to see the nature of

those earthquakes, those large earthquakes, which required major evacuations throughout the country. So we will be looking to stress test the system over the course of the next few days.

Media: So just to be completely clear, those people in Napier did not need to evacuate and therefore did not need—

PM: As Minister Allan said to me today—and I'll leave you to say it again—when we feel it, if it's long and strong, get gone. You need to move, because we'll never be able to get an alert out to you as quickly as you'll need to move if you feel that strong and rolling earthquake straight away. If you feel it, move. So those people did the right thing. For the Kermadec earthquake, that's at a distance that you might not feel it, and that's when you're really relying on us to look at all of the information we have to say, "You might not have felt that but you need to move, and we've got a bit more time to get you to move because it has been at a greater distance."

Media: Is there an argument to be made to have kind of like a second-tier alert system where you're just reassuring people and reminding them what to do—not so much a risk to life one, but just reminding people what to do in the case of emergency?

Hon Kiritapu Allan: Yeah, look, I mean, in the context—so we undertook a substantive review of the emergency management system in 2017 off the back of the Kaikōura and Christchurch earthquakes, by and large. There were a whole range of recommendations. Having that second tier of notifications wasn't something that I'm aware of was a consideration, but we're always looking, like I said, to stress test the system. One of the things that we'll be looking at over the course, I expect, of the next few days: was the messaging targeted to the right people; did sufficient number of people receive the notifications? I'm advised that thousands of people today received notifications at different times as the messaging shifted and as it was required. But we will be doing that deep dive to assess whether it's fit for appropriate.

Media: Then perhaps does there need to be a refreshed campaign just to remind people those "Drop, Cover, Hold", "Long, Strong, Get Gone" messages?

Hon Kiri Allan: Yeah, oddly, just this morning—which was going to be for my weekend bag. But look, those types of things are campaigns that we do run frequently. We were just about to launch into a tsunami public messaging campaign. This has now consolidated, or affirmed the necessity for doing that. I think one of the key takeaways from today is really the reminder we are islanders of a small Pacific Island nation that is surrounded by coastlines. Tsunamis are a big part of our lives, and I think bringing that to the forefront—you know, have your packed bag ready to go, have a plan about what to do and how to do it. So I think that's been a reminder and, yes, absolutely, there is always more time and it is always a prudent spend to be upping the knowledge of people in terms of these types of events.

Media: Minister, do you know how many people, roughly, the evacuation orders affected this morning—how many people were supposed to be evacuated?

Hon Kiri Allan: Look, I'm sure that we'll be able to report back in due course in terms of the actual substantive numbers. I'm advised at this stage that it was thousands, but in terms of exactly who was targeted and how, that's information I've sought.

PM: Because some can be locally distributed as well.

Hon Kiri Allan: Absolutely.

Media: Have you had any reports of damage across the country from the earthquakes or the surges?

Hon Kiri Allan: Yeah, to date, I haven't received any concerning or substantive damage to property or otherwise. However, that said, we have been in a bit of a state of flux through the course of the day, where the focus has been on getting people evacuated. Now

that that risk level's come down, the teams on the ground will start to pivot to be able to undertake a more substantive review so see whether there has been any damage.

Media: Are you going to send any [*Inaudible*] to the Kermadecs to be able to check if there's substantial damage to the structure to the economic structure there?

Hon Kiritapu Allan: Yeah, that's not something I've been advised on to date, but I will check on that with the team.

PM: The HMNZS *Canterbury* was due to be at the Kermadecs as we speak. They were due to carry GNS scientists, Sir Peter Blake Trust scholarship-holders—young people—and a group of iwi. Thankfully, as it were, the alert level stopped that deployment happening, because otherwise we would have had people on the island at the time, and I can't imagine what that experience would've been like for them.

Media: How close did that come to—

PM: Well, they were due to depart on Monday, is my understanding, but the alert level changes meant that they did not depart, and so on this occasion, all of the issues we're dealing with coalesced and actually prevented what I think would've been a very distressing, if not dangerous situation for those involved.

Media: Prime Minister, did you feel the earthquake?

PM: I did, absolutely.

Hon Kiritapu Allan: She sent me a text message to make sure I was going to be doing my job.

PM: Ha, ha! I checked in with the Minister for National Emergency Management—

Hon Kiritapu Allan: 2.29.

PM: —at 2.29—that is correct.

Media: And what was the thought, given that we've dealing with a pandemic and an earthquake of that magnitude?

PM: “Bugger it!”—pretty much what everyone else thought at that time. But, you know, this is, as the Minister has said, we are the shaky isles, and what we've got to do is no matter what experience we have, we do everything we can to prepare, so that in the future, if we have another experience, that we are even better prepared than we were the previous experience.

OK, we'll just wrap up with the last question, in the front.

Media: Just on the trip to the Kermadecs with HMNZS *Canterbury*, would you be looking to deploy that in the future—like with the trip going ahead?

PM: Well look, the Minister actually will be able to correct me here. My understanding is we usually have—the only people that generally are there are DOC staff.

Hon Kiritapu Allan: That's correct.

PM: DOC staff came off Raoul Island at the beginning of the lockdowns, I believe, so have not been there for some time. I think it'll be up to GNS and others—Conservation and the defence force—to determine when we see any change up there. There is some equipment, I believe, that we might need to do some work on.

Hon Kiritapu Allan: Yeah, and look, at the moment, GNS—obviously, they have an ongoing role in monitoring seismic activity. They will be doing that, and we won't, obviously, be deploying anybody up there until it has been deemed safe and appropriate to do so.

PM: OK. Thank you everyone.

conclusion of press conference