

Briefing

Very High Risk Country Process

Date due to MO:	2 August 2021	Action required by:	N/A
Security level:	IN CONFIDENCE	Health Report number:	20211714
To:	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister for COVID-19 Response		
Copy to:	Hon Nanaia Mahuta, Minister of Foreign Affairs Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall, Associate Minister of Health		

Contact for telephone discussion

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Minister's office to complete:

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Approved | <input type="checkbox"/> Decline | <input type="checkbox"/> Noted |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Needs change | <input type="checkbox"/> Seen | <input type="checkbox"/> Overtaken by events |
| <input type="checkbox"/> See Minister's Notes | <input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn | |

Comment:

Very High Risk Country Process

Security level: IN CONFIDENCE **Date:** 2 August 2021

To: Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister for COVID-19 Response

Purpose of report

1. This report responds to a request for information on the process that officials will follow when preparing advice to assist the Reconnecting New Zealanders Ministerial Group's decision to classify or declassify a country as very high risk (VHR).

Summary

2. On 5 July 2021, Cabinet agreed to a risk assessment framework for VHR countries and jurisdictions [SWC-21-MIN-0101].
3. Officials from the Ministry of Health (the Ministry), the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) have developed a process that sets out the steps and timeframes required to assess and implement decisions regarding the classification and review of a VHR country or jurisdiction.
4. The process is broadly divided into six components:
 - a. global surveillance and evaluation of countries of interest
 - b. public health risk assessment of countries of interest
 - c. preparation of interagency advice to Ministers
 - d. decision on country status by Ministers
 - e. implementation of Ministerial decision
 - f. a monthly review of VHR countries by Ministers.
5. This process begins on Monday 2 August 2021. You will begin receiving the weekly International Perspectives Report at the close of business on Tuesday 3 August 2021. This report will provide information on:
 - a. the global situation regarding COVID-19, including relevant trends
 - b. the COVID-19 situation in particular countries of interest
 - c. advice from officials to the Director-General of Health (Director-General) regarding whether a full public health assessment should be undertaken for any countries of interest.
6. On Monday 9 August 2021, as a member of the Reconnecting New Zealanders Ministerial Group (RNZMG), you will receive advice on the outcome of a review of all countries currently classified as VHR including a recommendation(s) from the

Director-General about the ongoing classification of these countries and risk mitigation measures.

Recommendations

We recommend you:

- a) **Note** that Cabinet agreed to a risk assessment framework for very high risk (VHR) countries and jurisdictions [SWC-21-MIN-0101]. **Noted**
- b) **Note** that officials from the Ministry of Health, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade have developed a process to assess and implement decisions regarding the classification and review of a VHR country or jurisdiction. **Noted**
- c) **Note** that the first monthly review of VHR countries will be provided to the Reconnecting New Zealanders Ministerial Group on Monday 9 August 2021. **Noted**



Dr Ashley Bloomfield
Te Tumu Whakarae mō te Hauora
Director-General of Health

Date: 1/8/2021



Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response

Date: 5/8/2021

Very High Risk Country Process

Background

1. On 5 July 2021, Cabinet agreed to a risk assessment framework for very high risk (VHR) countries and jurisdictions [SWC-21-MIN-0101]. The risk assessment framework sets out the process that officials will follow when preparing advice to assist the Reconnecting New Zealanders Ministerial Group's (RNZMG) decision to classify or declassify a country or jurisdiction as VHR.

Very High Risk Country Process

2. Officials from the Ministry of Health (the Ministry), the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) have developed a process that sets out the steps and timeframes required to assess and implement decisions regarding the classification and review of a VHR country.
3. The process is broadly divided into six components:
 - a. global surveillance and evaluation of countries of interest
 - b. public health risk assessment of countries of interest
 - c. preparation of interagency advice to Ministers
 - d. decision on country status by Ministers
 - e. implementation of Ministerial decision
 - f. a monthly review of VHR countries by Ministers.
4. A detailed process map is attached as *Appendix A*.

Classifying a country or jurisdiction as very high risk

Surveillance

5. At the beginning of each week, the Ministry will carry out a data-driven assessment to identify potential VHR jurisdictions.
 - a. Data used in this assessment will include:
 - i. the numbers and origins of cases presenting at the border over the previous six months [Particular attention needs to be paid to 'recent' cases, rather than 6 months. CH](#)
 - ii. COVID-19 case incidence, testing, vaccination, hospitalisation, and death rates as reported by the jurisdictions.
 - b. Identification of potential VHR jurisdictions will be informed by analysis, including:
 - i. raw data analysis
 - ii. threshold based modelling
 - iii. statistical modelling

- c. In collaboration with external experts, the Ministry will continue to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of these data sources and modelling approaches, and will introduce new sources and approaches as needed.
6. Officials from the Ministry, DPMC, and MFAT will meet to decide which countries to highlight in the Ministry's weekly International Perspectives Report and agree a recommendation for which countries, if any, should be put forward to the Director-General of Health (Director-General) to commission a comprehensive public health risk assessment.
7. The weekly report will provide information on:
 - a. the global situation regarding COVID-19, including relevant trends
 - b. the COVID-19 situation in particular countries of interest, and advice from officials to the Director-General of Health regarding whether a full public health assessment should be undertaken for any countries of interest.
8. The Director-General will then decide which, if any, countries should be subject to a public health risk assessment.

Public Health Risk Assessment

9. The public health risk assessment of a country of interest will be undertaken by the Office of the Director of Public Health. The factors that will be considered in the assessment are contained in *Appendix B: Overview of proposed country risk assessment framework*. The assessment will include any additional public health risk mitigation measures that may be recommended over those routinely implemented when a country is deemed VHR.
10. You will receive a copy of the weekly International Perspectives Report and, if undertaken, the public health risk assessment and notification of any recommendations of the Director-General to the RNZMG.

Development of Ministerial advice

11. If the Director-General recommends classifying a country as VHR, DPMC will develop advice for the RNZMG in consultation with relevant agencies including the Ministry, Crown Law, MFAT, Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, Ministry of Transport, and the New Zealand Customs Service.
12. This advice will note whether officials recommend implementing the standard set of risk mitigation measures already in place for VHR countries and jurisdictions, or any new risk mitigation measures that should be implemented.

Ministerial Decision

13. The RNZMG will decide whether to classify a country as VHR and any additional risk mitigation measures that will be applied above the standard measures for VHR countries.
14. Advice will be provided to Ministers before the weekend, to enable the decision to be made by the following Monday 12pm.

Implementation

15. Once a decision has been made to classify a jurisdiction as VHR, MFAT will advise the affected foreign government of New Zealand's COVID-19 risk assessment, which will require 24 hours before the decision is publicly released.
16. Following notification of the affected foreign government, the risk (re)assessments will then be publicly released.
17. The Ministry will issue drafting instructions to the Parliamentary Counsel Office (PCO) to amend the relevant section 11 orders under the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2020 (COVID-19 Act), to reflect decisions made by the RNZMG.
18. Once signed, the amendment order will enter into force 48 hours after it has been gazetted. This timeframe is in line with other orders that impose new limitations and restrictions.

Timeframe

19. From the point that a public health risk assessment is initiated, Ministers should have advice to enable a decision within two days, and, once a decision is made, a response will be implemented within four days.
20. As we already have robust risk mitigations at the border, and as risk is cumulative over time, this timeframe allows for:
 - a. the considered development of quality advice on which to base decisions
 - b. a sufficient notice period to inform the affected foreign government of New Zealand's COVID-19 risk assessment and manage any impacts to the bilateral relationship
 - c. and the statutory requirement to provide 48 hours before any amendment orders enter into force where new restrictions are imposed.
21. The following table outlines the timeframe for when each step will need to be completed so that a timely response to a VHR country can be implemented.

Risk assessment and analysis	
Day 1	Global surveillance. Interagency meeting to agree countries of interest. Evaluation of countries of interest.
Day 2	Interagency meeting to review outcome of the evaluation of countries of interest and agree recommendation for a public health risk assessment. Director-General receives weekly International Perspectives Report and decides whether a public health risk assessment is undertaken for any countries of interest.
Day 3	If so, a public health risk assessment is undertaken. Director-General decides overnight whether to recommend to the RNZMG that a country be classified as VHR.

Day 4	If so, DPMC develops advice for the RNZMG in consultation with relevant agencies.	
Day 5	RNZMG receives advice regarding a VHR recommendation.	
Implementation		
Day 1	DPMC notifies agencies of the RNZMG decision by 12pm. If required, the Ministry instructs PCO to draft amendment order. If required, MFAT advises affected government(s) of New Zealand's COVID-19 risk assessment.	
Day 2	Minister signs amendment order and it is gazetted. Assessment(s) released publicly.	48 hours' notice provided before the amendment comes into force
Day 3		
Day 4	Country or jurisdiction is classified as VHR as of 11:59pm that night.	

Monthly Review

22. As agreed by Cabinet [SWC-21-MIN-0101], every month the RNZMG will be provided with a report containing a review of all VHR countries. The process for the review will be similar to the process for determining a VHR classification, as outlined above. The Director-General's recommendations on whether a country should remain classified as VHR will be presented for consideration at the monthly RNZMG meeting. If a country is no longer considered VHR, amendments to the relevant section 11 orders will be prepared for your signature.
23. For the remainder of the year, a report containing the VHR monthly review will be provided to the RNZMG, via DPMC, on the following dates:
 - Monday 9 August 2021
 - Monday 6 September 2021
 - Monday 4 October 2021
 - Monday 1 November 2021
 - Monday 29 November 2021
 - Monday 20 December 2021.

Consultation

24. Throughout the development of this process and paper, we have consulted with DPMC and MFAT, who form the core of the interagency group with the Ministry.

Equity

25. Any changes to our border settings, and the potential impact on the movement of people, will need to consider the impact on human rights, particularly the proportionality of any strengthened or new measures.
26. From a human rights perspective, any limitations on New Zealanders arriving in New Zealand or other public health measures must be justified by being proportionate to the level of risk presenting to New Zealand. There is a specific requirement in the COVID-19 Act that the Minister must be satisfied that any limit an order would impose on rights protected by the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 (NZBORA) is a justified limited.
27. Any risk mitigation measures imposed on travellers are only intended to be temporary and will be reviewed every four weeks to ensure they are still justified.

Next steps

28. The future process for general country risk assessment and risk mitigation measures, beyond what is currently available, will be considered through the Reconnecting New Zealanders work programme.
29. This is a new process which we will be trialling from Monday 2 August 2021. We will review the process to ensure it is operating efficiently and effectively.
30. You will begin receiving the weekly International Perspective Report at the close of business on Tuesday 3 August 2021.

ENDS.

Very High Risk Countries Process Map

