

Pandemic leaves American Samoa residents stranded, homesick

By Fili Sagapolutele and Jennifer Sinco Kelleher
The Associated Press

PAGO PAGO, American Samoa — Makerita Iosefo Va'a hasn't been home for nearly eight months — the longest she's ever been away from American Samoa.

She longs for the breezes that cool island humidity and the ocean sounds and smells that permeate her home in the village of Tula. She also misses the food that's impossible to re-create in Tracy, California, where the coronavirus pandemic has left her and her husband stranded.

"Every time I talk about it, I just cry," she said.

Va'a left the U.S. territory in the Pacific in February with her husband for medical treatment. They planned to fly home in March from San Francisco but decided to postpone after hearing a security worker at the airport had contracted the virus.

Since then, they haven't been able to leave because American Samoa governor Lolo Matalasi Moliga closed the territory on March 13 to protect those on the islands from COVID-19 — and it hasn't reported any cases.

In July, after the order was extended, the Va'as stopped bothering to make travel plans and are awaiting word from government officials about when they can come home.

"The interests of the 60,000 residents on-island and protecting their lives outweighs the interest of the 600 or more residents stranded in the United States," said Iulogologo Joseph Pereira, chairman of the territorial government COVID-19 task force. "As the governor has continuously pointed out, more healthcare facilities are available in Hawai'i and mainland states that they can access if they contract the virus."

Some people from American Samoa were stranded in the midst of family visits or business travel. A Facebook page started by Va'a and others to share information has turned into a support system for those who long to go back to American Samoa, said Kueni Aumoealogo-Hisatake. She went to Honolulu with her husband for their bi-annual medical checkups on the last flight out of the territory on March 26 — not anticipating they would not be able to return.

Aumoealogo-Hisatake said the situation makes her "feel abandoned and neglected."

Other people can't leave American Samoa.

Epifania Rapozo lives in Washington state and returned to the territory in February for the first time in



TERRITORY CLOSED. This undated photo, provided by Epifania Rapozo, center, shows her with her two children — Mila, left, and Levi, right — on a hillside overlooking a scenic site on American Samoa's main island of Tutuila. Rapozo, a native of American Samoa, and her children, from Washington state, have been stranded in American Samoa since Hawaiian Airlines flights were suspended in late March. She and the children visited Pago Pago in February. (Epifania Rapozo via AP)

open its borders, just bring them home safely.

As they wait, the Va'as are living with relatives but fear they have overstayed their welcome and are making plans to move in with other family in Seattle.

They consider themselves lucky among the stranded. Makerita Iosefo Va'a is a manager at American Samoa's Medicaid office and her husband, Shaun Va'a, is a member of the territory's House of Representatives. While away, they're able to work remotely without losing income and they have rented a car so they can get out of their family's hair once in awhile.

"We have each other. We don't have children," she said. "There are people I know who have lost their jobs."

"It's nice here, but home is home," she added, pointing out that California, with its dry heat and isolation is much different than American Samoa. "Here, we don't really know people, versus back home you have a village. ... We have family here, but with COVID, you can't really go visit them."

Back home, not everyone wears a mask and social distancing is still catching on, especially in tight-knit Samoan cultures. Many people wonder what will happen when American Samoa opens its borders.

Ilalio Polevia and his 16-year-old daughter, Rita, were essentially homeless in Honolulu, when a group that helps Hawai'i visitors put them up in a hotel. They had left American Samoa in November so she could go to high school in Washington state. He stayed and got a job at a bagged salad company.

When the pandemic was declared in March, they decided it was time to go home and left Tacoma for Honolulu, but their flight to Pago Pago was cancelled.

"I'm surprised there's people here in Hawai'i that care about us," Polevia said.

After the father and daughter stayed at three different hotels, the visitors group connected them with a Samoan church and they have been living at the reverend's house for the past month.

Rita enrolled at Waipahu High School and is taking classes online. They are living off church donations and hope they can be home by Christmas.

Kelleher reported from Honolulu.

20 years to visit her ailing grandfather, who later died. Unable to return to the U.S., Rapozo's 10-year-old daughter has been taking online classes and her six-year-old son is enrolled in a local school.

"I am grateful that we are COVID-free but also quite disappointed on how the government is handling the issue," Rapozo said. "There is absolutely no excuse as to why there hasn't been any action implemented to repatriate not only us U.S. citizens but our own people."

Moliga is reviewing a petition by stranded residents demanding repatriation. But amid a spike in coronavirus cases in Hawai'i, he has asked Hawaiian Airlines — the only carrier with regularly scheduled service between Honolulu and Pago Pago — to suspend flights through November.

The territory is controlling its ports by quarantining crew members on boats, and essential workers arriving from the U.S. are tested for the virus.

Officials did arrange a free charter flight in July to take 150 Medicaid patients and support staff to the United States for medical treatment. There were enough extra seats to accommodate 45 students heading to the U.S. for college and 79 people who had been stranded on the island since March.

The nonmedical passengers paid \$884 for their one-way ticket, a price that prevented Rapozo from taking the flight. There were no passengers on the charter's return flight to Pago Pago.

"In the beginning, everybody was happy that our government closed the borders, you know, for safety," Aumoealogo-Hisatake said. "But now, as time has accumulated, there's more understanding about the virus and the preventive measures and all that stuff and how to deal with it."

She and others say they don't want American Samoa to

Tokyo Olympics to give refunds to ticket buyers in Japan

Continued from page 5

this can happen — with or without a vaccine, using quarantines or rapid testing.

The IOC and Tokyo organizers are running several task forces looking at ways to handle immigration and COVID-19. Japan has been relatively safe in the pandemic with about 1,750 deaths attributed to the coronavirus. But conditions elsewhere haven't been as good.

"You're going to have to be comfortable being uncomfortable for the next six to nine months because there is no certainty in terms of what will happen," Ken Hanscom, the chief operating officer of the Los Angeles-based firm TicketManager, told AP in an interview.

Hanscom isn't connected with Olympic ticketing, but his company manages big-event tickets for corporate clients. He's also organized a popular Facebook page that's a go-to for Tokyo ticket information.



The big question for Tokyo is: How to let 15,400 Olympic and Paralympic athletes into Japan, along with thousands of officials, judges, sponsors, media, and broadcasters. Add to this the issue of fans. Will non-Japanese be allowed to attend? Or will it be only Japanese?

A major concern for the IOC is getting the games on television, since selling broadcast rights provides 73% of its income. Another 18% is from 14 top sponsors.

OLYMPIC REFUNDS. Paralympian Monika Seryu, right, and comedian Ryota Yamasato unveil the design of the tickets for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics in Tokyo, in this January 15, 2020 file photo. Fans living in Japan who bought tickets for the postponed Tokyo Olympics have been guaranteed refunds, the local organizing committee has said. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

Tokyo organizers have budgeted \$800 million in income from ticket sales in Japan and abroad, their third largest source of income. Any shortfall could stress an already stretched budget.

Organizers say 4.48 million Olympic tickets have been sold in Japan, with 970,000 tickets for the Paralympics. Organizers say a total of 7.8 million Olympic tickets had been available overall.

Hidenori Suzuki, the organizing committee's deputy executive director of marketing, though he had very specific local numbers, said he did not know how many tickets had been sold outside Japan.

"We do not have an accurate figure," he said. He suggested it was 10% to 20% of the overall total, which could mean anything between 780,000 and 1.56 million tickets.

Tokyo says it is spending \$12.6 billion to organize the Olympics. But a government audit last year said it was likely twice that much. All but \$5.6 billion is public money.

In addition, neither the organizers nor the government have said how much the one-year delay will cost, with most estimates at between \$2 billion or \$3 billion.

The University of Oxford said in September that Tokyo was the most expensive Summer Olympics on record.

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