

Dili Archdiocese cancels Masses after first Covid-19 case - UCA News

Dili Archdiocese in Timor-Leste has suspended public Masses and other church activities for a week after the government confirmed the first novel coronavirus case in the predominantly Catholic country .

The decision by Archbishop Virgílio do Carmo da Silva of Dili came hours after the health ministry announced the first confirmed case of Covid-19 on March 21.

All Masses and other activities such as the Way of the Cross were suspended from March 21-28.

"I take these steps to avoid the further spread of the coronavirus in the community," the prelate said March 21.

Archbishop Da Silva asked Catholics to pray at home but allowed priests to celebrate Mass without the participation of the faithful.

"The Way of the Cross on March 27 will not take place in a church. Instead, the people can do it in their homes," the archbishop said. "Don't panic, keep praying and trusting in God's merciful and endless love."

Before the suspension of church services, Catholics were already being told not to use holy water at church entrances, kissing statues or any form of physical contact with fellow churchgoers. Sick people were also discouraged from attending Mass.

Elia dos Reis Amaral, Timor-Leste's interim health minister, said on March 21 that the first coronavirus patient had just returned from overseas and was being isolated and treated by a medical team in a Dili hospital.

"The person told health workers he had Covid-19 symptoms, so he was immediately isolated," she said.

Meanwhile, Minister of Youth Education and Sports Dulce de Jesus Soares has ordered the suspension of all school classes from March 23-28 to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

"Children should isolate themselves in their homes with their parents for a week," Soares told reporters on March 22.

University classes were suspended for two weeks from March 23 to April 4.

Timor-Leste's attempts to ward off a coronavirus outbreak started earlier with the closure of three land borders with Indonesia on March 19. Flights in and out of the country were still flying but were reduced and being closely monitored by authorities.

Timor-Leste has a population of about 1.3 million, of which 97 percent are Catholics.