
JAPAN

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Japan govt faces questions over coronavirus, Tokyo cancels events

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TOKYO (Reuters) - Japan faced growing questions about whether it was doing enough to stop the spread of the coronavirus on Friday, as the Tokyo Metropolitan Government said it would cancel or postpone major indoor events it has sponsored for the next three weeks.

More than 400 Japanese and foreign passengers were set to disembark from the virus-hit Diamond Princess cruise ship near Tokyo after weeks aboard in quarantine, despite reports of new cases coming in from around Japan.

Over 600 people on the cruise liner, which has been quarantined off Yokohama since arriving on Feb. 3 carrying 3,700 people, have been infected with the virus.

Two of them - both Japanese in their 80s - died on Thursday, and about 100 passengers are due to be transferred ashore in coming days for further quarantine because they were in close quarters with infected travellers.

Around Japan, more than 80 people have tested positive for the virus, including three more confirmed on Friday in the northern island of Hokkaido. Two are brothers in elementary school, recovering in hospital, with the third a quarantine officer, Hokkaido's governor said at a briefing.

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Saitama prefecture, north of Tokyo, said on Friday it had confirmed that a preschool boy was infected. The boy and his father, who has already tested positive, returned to Japan from China on a chartered flight earlier this month, the prefecture said.

Ishikawa prefecture, about 300 kilometres west of Tokyo, said it had confirmed its first case of the virus, in a man in his 50s.

The growing number of cases across the country - particularly the high rate of infection on the cruise liner - have stoked concerns about Japan's quarantine practices. The virus has killed more than 2,200 in mainland China so far.

At a briefing on Friday, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga faced questions about why one of the liner passengers who died - an 84-year-old woman - was not tested or transferred to a hospital until a week after she developed a fever.

"The woman was removed from the ship on the 12th after the fever continued for days," he said. "A decision was made not to wait for the test results before moving her to hospital to protect the health of those remaining on the ship."

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'WHAT THE HECK'

Many Japanese on social media expressed concern about their government's handling of the situation.

"There are still crew testing positive on the ship, yet people are being allowed to disembark - and told it's okay to use public transportation to get home, then told by the health ministry to avoid using public transportation after they are home," wrote one Twitter user using the handle 'Homo Sapiens'.

"What the heck is this?"

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) said in a note on its website that it had put Japan at "Watch Level 1", the lowest of a three-level travel advisory scale.

It said that while it didn't recommend postponing or cancelling trips to Japan because of the virus, travellers should take precautions including "avoiding contact with sick people" and rigorous hand-washing.

In the latest in a series of sports events to be curtailed or cancelled, a women's marathon in the central Japanese city of Nagoya set for March 8 will be limited to elite runners only, while the Nagoya City Marathon scheduled for the same day has been cancelled, organisers said.

Both the Tokyo Marathon, which will be limited to elite runners, and the Nagoya race are Olympic qualifying events for Japanese marathon runners, deepening concern about whether the Summer Games set to start on July 24 will go ahead as planned.

Slideshow (5 Images)

Olympics Minister Seiko Hashimoto said the International Olympic Committee had told the Japanese government there were no problems holding the Games as planned at this stage, according to media reports, while at the same time the minister urged sick people not to show up at Olympic torch relay events starting on March 26.

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