

Japan partly ending pandemic emergency, keeps it for Tokyo

26 February 2021, by Yuri Kageyama



A man wearing a protective mask to help curb the spread of the coronavirus walks near the banner for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games Thursday, Feb. 25, 2021, in Tokyo. The Japanese capital confirmed more than 340 new coronavirus cases on Thursday. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)

The state of emergency Japan set up to curb the spread of the coronavirus will be lifted in six urban areas this weekend and remain in the Tokyo area for another week, a government minister said Friday.

Partially lifting the emergency, and just a week early, underlines Japan's eagerness to keep business restrictions to a minimum to keep the economy going.

The emergency, which began in January, centers around asking restaurants, bars and other businesses to close at 8 p.m.

Japan has never had a mandatory lockdown, but has managed to keep infections relatively low, with deaths related to COVID-19 at about 7,700 people.

Yasutoshi Nishimura, the minister in charge of

pandemic measures, told a special government panel that the emergency will be lifted in Aichi, Gifu, Osaka, Kyoto and Hyogo in central Japan, and in southwestern Fukuoka.

Tokyo and surrounding Saitama, Chiba and Kanagawa prefectures are to continue to observe the emergency until March 7, although an official decision has not yet been announced.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga asked that efforts to bring the pandemic under control continue so the emergency can be lifted for the entire nation.

"Unlike some other nations, Japan has taken a focused approach," Suga told reporters about closing restaurants at 8 p.m.

He said the state of emergency for the Tokyo area could be extended if coronavirus cases remain high.

Worries have been growing because the pace of deaths has shot up since late last year. A vaccine rollout has barely begun, and the general population is not expected to receive the shots for months.

Concern remains that lifting the emergency too quickly sends the wrong message, when hospitals in some areas are packed.

Shigeru Omi, a doctor on a government panel of coronavirus experts, warned that caution is still needed.

"The spread of infections has definitely lessened, but the pace of the drop appears to be reaching a halt," he told parliament on Friday.

Since last year, the Japanese economy has been slammed by a drop in consumption, tourism, exports and manufacturing.

Schools are open, and some commuter trains are still crowded. But people are encouraged to work from home, and almost everyone is wearing a mask.

Worries about health risks have raised doubts about the Tokyo Olympics, postponed from last year and set to start in July. Officials have said the games are on, even if the vaccination effort is not completed.

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