

Coronavirus infects at least 10 on Japan cruise ship

February 5 2020



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Thousands were marooned on a cruise ship off the Japanese coast Wednesday, after medics evacuated 10 people infected with the deadly coronavirus, with many facing an anxious wait for their own test results.

Passengers on board the Diamond Princess are being confined to their cabins for as long as 14 days and many expressed concern about medication running out.

Tests are being carried out on samples taken from 273 of the 3,711 people on board after a former passenger who disembarked in Hong Kong was diagnosed with the virus that has claimed almost 500 lives in China, where it originated.

Japanese Health Minister Katsunobu Kato told parliament on Tuesday that tests are being conducted on three groups: those presenting symptoms; those who disembarked in Hong Kong and those who had been in close contact with the infected passenger.

Of the 31 results received so far, 10 people tested positive for the virus. They were removed from the vessel and taken to medical facilities, Kato said.

Operator Princess Cruise Lines said around half the passengers on board the ship are Japanese but there were no immediate details on the nationalities of the other travellers.

Of the 10 who tested positive, three are Japanese, three from Hong Kong, two Australian, one American and one Filipino crew member, the operator said.

One Japanese man in his 70s told public broadcaster NHK that stricter quarantine measures came into force on Wednesday.

"Until yesterday, we were able to spend time in common spaces and do things like play ping-pong. But from this morning, we have not been allowed to go out of our rooms," said the man, who declined to be identified.

"I tried to go to a restaurant this morning for breakfast but I was told: 'Please eat in your room.' So I have been waiting for room service. But it hasn't arrived yet."

Kato appealed for the passengers and crew, who come from 56 countries, to cooperate with authorities, and said he assumed the quarantine would last around 14 days—the estimated maximum incubation period for the virus.

'Staring at the sea'

Meanwhile, thousands on board a similar cruise ship that docked in Hong Kong on Wednesday were also being checked, officials said, after three recent passengers tested positive for coronavirus.

"Our medical staff immediately went on board to do health check-ups," said Leung Yiu-hong, an official with the city's Centre for Health Protection.

"Unless they have permission from the Department of Health, all passengers and crew members are not allowed to get off," he added.

More than 20 countries have confirmed cases of the virus, which has infected more than 24,000 in mainland China.

The outbreak has prompted the World Health Organization to declare a global health emergency, several governments to impose travel restrictions, and airlines to suspend flights to and from China.

Japan has now confirmed 23 cases of the new coronavirus—excluding the cruise ship infections—among them citizens returning from Wuhan, the Chinese city at the centre of the outbreak.

Tokyo has evacuated more than 500 Japanese citizens from Wuhan, and attracted some criticism for its relatively loose quarantine approach.

There have been several incidences of apparent person-to-person transmission in Japan, including a tour guide and bus driver who contracted the virus after coming into contact with visitors from Wuhan.

Neither had visited China in recent months.

The Diamond Princess is now steaming further out to sea to perform what operator Princess Cruises described as "normal marine operations" before returning off Yokohama to stock up with "food, provisions and other supplies".

One woman on the ship told TV Asahi she was resigned to her fate.

"I think you have to accept that we're staying on the ship. But what I am going to do for 14 days in a cabin? I'm just staring at the sea."

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Citation: Coronavirus infects at least 10 on Japan cruise ship (2020, February 5) retrieved 18 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-02-coronavirus-infects-japan-cruise-ship.html>

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