

Japan cruise ship virus cases jump to 218 as elderly offered escape

February 13 2020

Japan said Thursday it would allow some elderly passengers off a quarantined cruise ship and into government-designated lodging, as the number of new coronavirus cases on the vessel jumped to 218.

Thousands of passengers and crew on the Diamond Princess—the single largest cluster of infected people outside China—face several days more of quarantine, with many taking to social media to voice their concerns.

Those working on the ship have been reluctant to speak to reporters for fear of losing their jobs, but two crew members broke their silence in a video broadcast by Indian media Thursday.

"We are scared that if the infection is spreading, it is spreading so fast that we could also become affected," said Sonali Thakkar, a ship security officer.

"We don't want to (become sick). We just want to go back home," she said in the clip broadcast by NDTV.

With passengers mostly confined to their cabins, crew members have to go door-to-door to deliver food and other supplies, and some fear this has reduced the effectiveness of the quarantine.

Health Minister Katsunobu Kato said Thursday there were 44 new cases—including one crew member—an additional 221 tests.

He said also that some elderly passengers would be allowed off the ship if they test negative for the COVID-19 virus.

Those who opt to leave will be moved to government facilities to wait out a quarantine that is set to last until February 19.

"If they test negative, those who wish to disembark can go and live in a lodging facility that the government will prepare," Kato said.

Captain Stefano Ravera informed the passengers of the new plan via ship broadcast.

"The Ministry of Health has already tested guests 80 years or older who are staying in a cabin without a balcony, and those 80 years or older with chronic medical conditions," he said.

Quarantine questions

Kato said five people from the ship were in serious condition in hospital—four who have tested positive for the virus. Test results for the fifth are still being processed.

With dozens of new cases diagnosed almost daily, questions have been raised about the pace of testing and whether the quarantine is working.

Japan initially tested around 300 people who had close contact with the first infected passenger, or have displayed symptoms, but they have gradually widened the net as new cases were detected.

Officials saying they can only process 300 people a day, but hope eventually to expand this to 1,000.

In addition to the cases on the ship, Japan has confirmed 28 other

infections—mostly among evacuees from Hubei, where the virus emerged.

Four flights have brought back hundreds of people, most of whom are undergoing "self-quarantine" in government-designated hotels.

Evacuees from the first flight, which landed on January 29, were cleared to leave the quarantine on Wednesday night after passing a final round of checks.

As they left their hotel in Chiba, east of Tokyo, they thanked local residents for their solidarity.

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