

# Japan reports two more virus-linked deaths, urges public events cancelled

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Japan reported two more deaths linked to the coronavirus Wednesday as the government called for organisers to reconsider holding major events in coming weeks to limit the outbreak.

The news came as dozens of passengers allowed off a virus-stricken cruise ship were reported to have developed symptoms including fever, and will be asked to be re-tested for the virus.

A Tokyo man in his 80s who tested positive for the infection died of pneumonia, the health ministry said.

He had not travelled to China recently and there was no sign he had contact with known infected individuals, it said in a statement.

Another elderly person in the Hokkaido region of northern Japan died of viral pneumonia, the ministry said.

Testing done after the death confirmed the infection of the individual, whose details have not been released at the request of the family.

Seven deaths linked to the virus have now been reported in Japan—four of them former passengers from the Diamond Princess—while the country has also recorded more than 700 infections from the boat and at least 160 off it.

"In light of the significant infection risks, we will ask that national sporting or cultural events that will attract large crowds be either cancelled, postponed or downsized for the next two weeks," Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told a cabinet task force meeting on the outbreak.

## **Concerts cancelled**

After the announcement, the Nippon Professional Baseball Organization said its unofficial spring games through March 15 would be held in empty stadiums before the official season opens on March 20.

Some top Japanese musicians—including all-male group Exile and

female trio Perfume—cancelled concerts, while the Tokyo Girls Collection fashion show on Saturday will be held with no audience, according to their organisers.

The virus has also forced professional football, rugby, golf, tennis and other sports to reschedule games or to hold events with no fans in attendance.

The sumo association will hold an emergency board meeting on Sunday to discuss whether to hold their sold-out March tournament in Osaka in western Japan.

The government has also asked state-operated museums and theatres to consider closing or cancelling shows.

Abe and cabinet ministers have repeatedly said that the coming weeks will be critical in limiting the spread of the virus in Japan.

But those measures have been largely advisory, including recommending that people work from home or commute off-peak.

The governor of Hokkaido, where at least 38 people have been diagnosed, said he was asking local municipalities to close public schools for one week from Thursday.

In Tokyo, meanwhile, the regional education board said public high schools could start late to spare students travelling on packed commuter trains.

The outbreak has raised fears that the Olympic Games to be hosted in Tokyo this summer could be cancelled, a possibility government officials and organisers have rejected.

"We have not thought about it. We have not heard about it. We have made inquiries, and we were told there is no such plan," Tokyo 2020 CEO Toshiro Muto told reporters.

"Our basic thinking is to conduct the Olympics and Paralympics as planned. That's our assumption."

Along with at least 165 infections across the country, Japan has dealt with lingering worries about those who disembarked from the virus-hit Diamond Princess cruise ship.

The government has contacted 813 former passengers of the ship and found "45 people had certain symptoms", Health Minister Katsunobu Kato told parliament.

"We asked all of them (who have symptoms) to see a doctor and to take tests."

Japan has come under increasing pressure over its handling of the crisis on the vessel.

Those allowed off the ship after a 14-day quarantine were asked to stay inside, but no formal measures restricting their movement were imposed.

Around 970 people were allowed off the boat last week after testing negative for the virus, but several have subsequently been diagnosed with the illness.

Opposition lawmakers have blamed the government for failing to implement a fresh 14-day quarantine after the passengers left the cruise ship—as was required by countries that repatriated citizens from the boat.

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