

# Japan extends emergency amid vaccine, Olympic uncertainty

February 2 2021, by Mari Yamaguchi

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People wearing face masks to protect against the spread of the coronavirus walk along sidewalk in Tokyo, Tuesday, Feb. 2, 2021. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga announced Tuesday that he is extending a coronavirus state of emergency in Tokyo and nine other

areas through March 7, amid growing uncertainty over the national rollout of vaccines and the hosting of the Tokyo Olympics this summer.

Suga said he will speed up vaccination plans and start inoculating a first group of medical workers in mid-February, instead of the earlier target of late February.

Under the state of emergency, the government has issued non-binding requests for people to avoid crowds and eating out in groups, and for restaurants and bars to close by 8 p.m.

New cases have declined in Tokyo and nationwide since early January, but experts say hospitals remain flooded with serious cases and that preventive measures should remain in place.

Japan has had about 400,000 coronavirus cases, including 5,800 deaths.

"I seek your cooperation to endure just a bit longer," Suga said. "We must make sure the infections are on a continuous decline." The emergency will be lifted before March 7 in areas with significant improvements in infections and their medical systems, he said.

The emergency will end Sunday as earlier planned in one prefecture, Tochigi north of Tokyo, where the situation has improved. It will remain in place in Tokyo and its neighbors Saitama, Chiba and Kanagawa, as well as in Osaka, Kyoto, Hyogo and Fukuoka in the west and Aichi and Gifu in central Japan.

About 80% of the cases in Japan are in the 10 prefectures under the emergency and the area needs to be under a close watch, said health minister Norihisa Tamura said earlier Tuesday.

In addition to the request for bars and restaurants to close early,

employers were asked to arrange for more of their staff to work from home. Additionally, the government will expand testing, officials said.



A man wearing a face mask to protect against the spread of the coronavirus rides a scooter along a sidewalk in Tokyo, Tuesday, Feb. 2, 2021. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

Unlike Japan's first emergency in April and May last year, schools, gyms, theaters and shops remain open, although some stores are voluntarily closing early.

He said the measures focus on narrow targets such as dining and service hours, in addition to basics such as mask wearing, handwashing and

avoiding crowds.

Suga took office in September and pledged to get the economy back on track while keeping coronavirus infections under control. He says he is determined to hold the Tokyo Olympics this summer.

He has promised to secure enough vaccines to cover Japan's entire population of 127 million by June, but none has been approved yet.

Administrative Reform Minister Taro Kono, who is in charge of COVID-19 vaccines, raised concern Tuesday about the delayed distribution of European-made vaccines, saying Japan's preparations have been affected by a lack of EU clarity.

"Our vaccine supply schedule has not been finalized even now," Kono said.

Japanese officials have said they hope to launch inoculations with Pfizer vaccines, some of which are produced in the EU, starting with medical workers, then elderly people and others with underlying health conditions. The general public is not expected to receive vaccines until around June, and obtaining "herd immunity" ahead of the Olympics in July is considered unlikely, especially in a country known for vaccine skepticism.

Suga has faced criticism for delaying anti-virus actions until late December, when he finally suspended government-subsidized tourism and dining promotion campaigns. He was seen as too slow to act until local leaders pleaded for government leadership. The number of new daily infections and deaths roughly doubled over one month between November and December.

Support ratings for Suga's government have nosedived in recent polls

which showed public dissatisfaction with his handling of the virus.

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