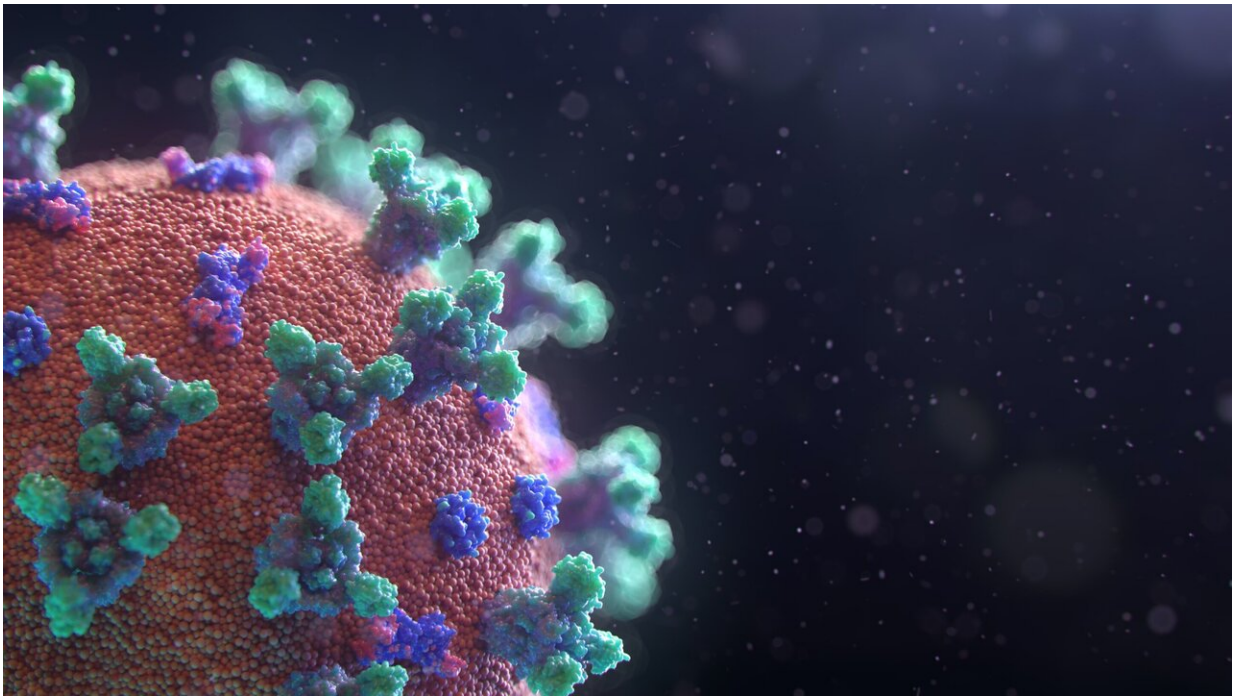


Japan extends virus emergency as India posts record infections

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A coronavirus state of emergency in Tokyo and other parts of Japan was extended on Friday, less than three months before the Olympics, as India logged yet another record number of infections.

While many Western nations have begun a gradual opening-up—Germany on Friday declared that a recent surge of infections had

been "broken"—much of the world continues to battle a virus that has now claimed more than 3.2 million lives.

Japan's COVID-19 outbreak remains much smaller than in many countries, with around 10,500 deaths.

But its vaccine rollout is moving slowly and more infectious variants are driving fresh waves of contagion, with record case numbers seen in some regions and medics warning that hospitals are under strain.

The pandemic has disrupted test events for the upcoming Olympics, with several postponed, cancelled or moved abroad, although the Diving World Cup and a rowing qualifier went ahead this week in Tokyo with athletes from abroad.

The emergency measures, less strict than blanket lockdowns in other countries, had been due to end on May 11 but will now continue until the end of the month, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said.

"The number of new virus cases is at a high level in major cities, while hospitals continue to be overwhelmed in Osaka and Hyogo prefectures," he said.

The recent surge has forced Olympic torch relays off Japan's roads, with the world's oldest person, a Japanese woman aged 118, giving up her spot in the event.

Record cases in India

Grappling with the world's worst surge is India, where record daily cases have seen the country register up to half of all global infections in the past week.

Thursday saw the country post 414,000 new cases in the past 24 hours, another global record, as well as almost 4,000 deaths, according to official data that many experts suspect is a gross underestimate.

The capital New Delhi is one of the worst-hit, along with West Bengal in the east, which recently completed an eight-phase election that saw mass rallies by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other politicians—events now partly blamed for the staggering rise in infections.

India's surge has also been worsened by chronic shortages of hospital beds and oxygen, prompting an outpouring of international aid to the country.

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal has indicated, however, that the crisis in the capital had eased slightly.

"Yesterday, for the first time, we received 730 tonnes of oxygen," Kejriwal told reporters. "But these supplies are needed daily."

The surge has quickly spilled over to India's neighbours in Bangladesh, Nepal and to Sri Lanka, which on Thursday became the latest country to seal its borders with the South Asian giant.

All three countries are now fighting their own surges of the virus, which has even reached as high as Nepal's Everest Base Camp, where more than 30 sick climbers have been evacuated from the foot of the world's highest mountain.

In the last three weeks, Nepal's daily case trajectory has shot up with two out of five people tested now returning positive.

"The hospital is overloaded, we are treating patients at each and every corner of the building," doctor Badri Chapagain said at Bheri Hospital in

the Nepalese city of Nepalgunj, which borders India.

'Highest possible alert'

While vaccine roll-outs elsewhere had sparked hopes of a swift return to business-as-usual, Australia's trade and tourism minister said Friday the country was likely to remain shut to visitors until late 2022.

The government also said it would not extend a ban on Australian citizens returning from India after widespread public outrage.

Tunisia meanwhile ordered a partial lockdown from Sunday for the week-long Eid al-Fitr holidays, warning that any further increase in infections could overwhelm specialist care facilities.

In Britain, the scientific committee overseeing the country's vaccination programme on Friday recommended that under-40s be offered an alternative to the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID jab as a way to "increase vaccination confidence".

Many people have shied away from getting the AstraZeneca vaccine after UK and European regulators recorded a very small number of people developing clots with low blood platelet levels.

Europe's medicines regulator said Friday it was also monitoring links to clots with the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines, but added that "the current evidence does not suggest a causal relation".

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