

Japan expands virus emergency, weighs legal penalties

August 17 2021, by Yuri Kageyama



Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga speaks to reporters about the extension of a state of emergency at his official residence in Tokyo Monday, Aug. 16, 2021. The emergency for curbing surging COVID-19 cases will continue through Sept. 12 rather than ending at the end of this month as initially planned, the government decided Monday. Credit: Yoshitaka Sugawara/Kyodo News via AP

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga officially expanded and extended the nation's coronavirus state of emergency on Tuesday, as government advisers recommended legal changes that would allow penalties for violations.

The measures, approved by a government [task force](#), add seven prefectures to the six areas already under a [state of emergency](#) and extend it to Sept. 12.

Ten other prefectures were put under a "quasi-emergency," which had previously encompassed six prefectures, bringing about two-thirds of the nation under some form of emergency as COVID-19 infections "explode" across the nation, in Suga's words.

Hospitals have been stretched thin and some seriously [sick people](#) have been turned away. More than 15,000 people are confirmed to have died from the coronavirus.

The government has taken pride in avoiding compulsory measures or a lockdown, but some experts and critics are wondering if voluntary measures are enough.

Shigeru Omi, the nation's top medical adviser, said the task force is considering legal changes which are needed to institute penalties or declare a lockdown.

"We have so far relied on asking people to restrict their activities, and maybe that isn't enough to overcome this situation," Omi told reporters.

The emergency measures center around asking restaurants and bars to close at 8 p.m. and not serve alcohol. Under the latest measures, department stores and shopping malls will be asked to restrict the number of customers to reduce crowding.



People wearing face masks to protect against the spread of the coronavirus walk on a crossing in Tokyo Monday, Aug. 16, 2021. Tokyo has been under what it calls a state of emergency. Credit: AP Photo/Koji Sasahara



People wearing face masks to protect against the spread of the coronavirus walk on a street in Tokyo Monday, Aug. 16, 2021. Tokyo has been under what it calls a state of emergency. Credit: AP Photo/Koji Sasahara

Requests remain in place for people to work from home, but some bosses require staff to work in the office. Commuter trains and Tokyo streets remain crowded, although almost everyone wears masks.

Tokyo has been the worst hit, with 4,377 new cases recorded on Tuesday.

The emergency was in effect throughout the recently concluded Tokyo Olympics and will remain in force during the Paralympics, which open Aug. 24.

Critics have said that holding the Games sent a festive message which caused people to take the virus less seriously.

Only about a third of the Japanese population has been fully vaccinated as the more infectious delta variant spreads. Taro Kono, the minister in charge of the vaccine rollout, said Tuesday that Japan has secured enough vaccine doses to provide booster shots.

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