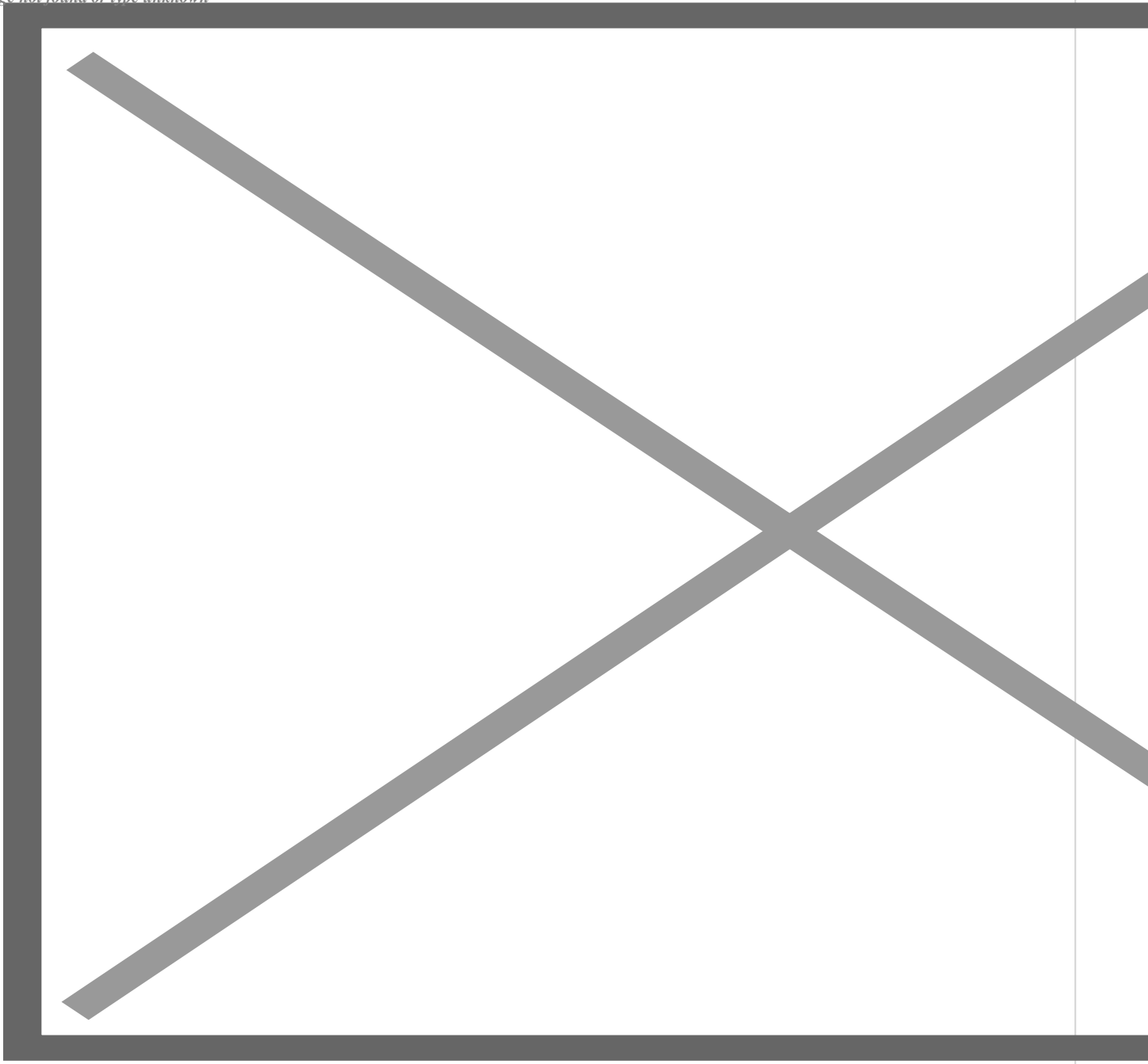


Japan on 'maximum alert' on COVID-19, Tokyo at highest level

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Japan confirmed a record of more than 2,000 coronavirus cases on Wednesday. (Photo: Issei Kato / Reuters)

Tokyo, November 19 (RHC)-- Japan is on “maximum alert” after confirming a record number of daily coronavirus cases, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said on Thursday, but said the government was not yet planning to impose more restrictions to curb the outbreak.

Some 2,201 new cases were recorded across the country on Wednesday, with nearly 500 in the capital, Tokyo, a sprawling metropolis of nearly 14 million people. City authorities later raised the city to the highest of a four-tier scale, but the move does not come with any additional restrictions on activity and Japanese media said early business closures were unlikely for now.

While small compared with figures seen in some other countries, the numbers represent a sharp rise for Japan, where testing is often less wide-scale than in other parts of the world. “We are now in a situation of maximum alert,” Suga told reporters.

“I ask you, the Japanese people, to fully implement principles such as wearing masks,” he added, urging people to wear them even while talking during meals in restaurants.

National broadcaster NHK said Suga had asked expert advisers to meet on Thursday and Friday to examine the growing number of infections before the government takes any further measures. The government’s chief spokesman said it would monitor infection rates and the capacity of hospitals to cope before acting. “We will respond appropriately based on conditions,” Katsunobu Kato told a regular news briefing.

Suga said he would support local regions if they asked businesses to close early, and that restrictions, including limiting groups at restaurants to four people, should be considered.

Japan has so far taken a comparatively relaxed approach to the coronavirus with few of the strict curbs imposed elsewhere in the world. Even a nationwide state of emergency that was announced early in the year carried no obligation for businesses to close or for people to stay at home.

Although testing has ramped up, it has remained comparatively low, with approximately 5,000-6,000 people tested each day in the capital.

Still, Japan has seen a relatively small outbreak so far, with close to 121,000 recorded cases and slightly more than 1,900 deaths since the virus was first detected in the country in January.

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