

Japan declares emergency as COVID-19 cases hit record high

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

Tokyo, January 8 (RHC)-- Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga declared on Thursday a one-month state of emergency in Tokyo and surrounding areas, urging residents of the capital to avoid going out and asking bars and restaurants to close by 8 p.m. amid a record surge in COVID-19 infections.

The emergency will run from Friday until February 7 and will cover the capital and three neighbouring prefectures of Kanagawa, Saitama and Chiba – a region home to about 30 percent of the country's population.

"I'm very alarmed by the severe situation nationwide recently," Suga told a news conference. "Please take this matter seriously as your own, to protect all precious life, your grandparents, family and friends."

The declaration came as Tokyo logged a new daily high of 2,447 COVID-19 infections, a figure that shattered the record 1,591 cases reported on Wednesday. Nationwide, a new record of more than 7,000 cases was reported on Thursday.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Japan – which has the oldest population in the world – has recorded more than 266,000 cases and 3,859 deaths, figures far below those seen in many of the world's advanced economies.

Suga also imposed caps on attendance at sporting and other events at 5,000 people and urged residents of the four prefectures to work from home in a bid to reduce commuter traffic by 70 percent. He pledged more aid for hospitals treating COVID-19 patients and said efforts were under way to approve a vaccine and begin inoculations by late February.

The emergency is Japan's second but is more limited than the one imposed by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe last April, when mass gatherings were cancelled and schools, businesses and nightclubs were largely closed nationwide for about six weeks.

Reducing transmission is key for Japan as the country is in the midst of preparations to host the delayed Tokyo Olympics in July. But medical experts say the measures on Thursday may not be adequate to curb Japan's third and severest wave.

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