

Japan opens mass vaccination sites for elderly ahead of Olympics

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Tokyo, May 24 (RHC)-- Japan has opened mass inoculation centers in Tokyo, Osaka and other cities as it races to vaccinate most of its elderly population before the start of the Olympic Games in July. The centers, opened on Monday, will vaccinate thousands of people every day, giving a boost to Japan's sluggish vaccination drive as officials battle a fourth wave of coronavirus infections.

"It's better to get it early," said Tetsuya Urano, 66, who was among the first to be vaccinated in the Japanese capital. "It went pretty smoothly, all in all."

The Tokyo facility, staffed by military doctors and nurses, will operate 12 hours a day to dispense shots to 10,000 people daily for the next three months. The site in Osaka, Japan's western metropolis, will build up to about 5,000 shots a day. Large-scale inoculation sites operated by local governments also opened in the prefectures of Aichi, Miyagi, and Gunma.

"Speeding up the rollout makes us feel safer because it affects our social life and the economy," said Munemitsu Watanabe, a 71-year-old office worker who got his first shot at the Tokyo center. "If 80-90 percent of the population gets vaccinated, I think we can hold the Olympics smoothly."

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga had called for the centres to be opened last month in a bid to expedite Japan's vaccination rollout as a surge in COVID-19 cases fuelled anti-Olympic sentiment across the country. Currently, Tokyo and nine other areas that are home to 40 percent of Japan's population are under a virus-related state of emergency that is due to end on May 31.

The measures – in place in some regions since January – are likely to be extended, several people with knowledge of the decision told Reuters news agency. With coronavirus cases still persistently high, two doctors' associations have warned that the healthcare system is already overstretched and the Games – which are due to begin on July 23 – would add further stress.

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