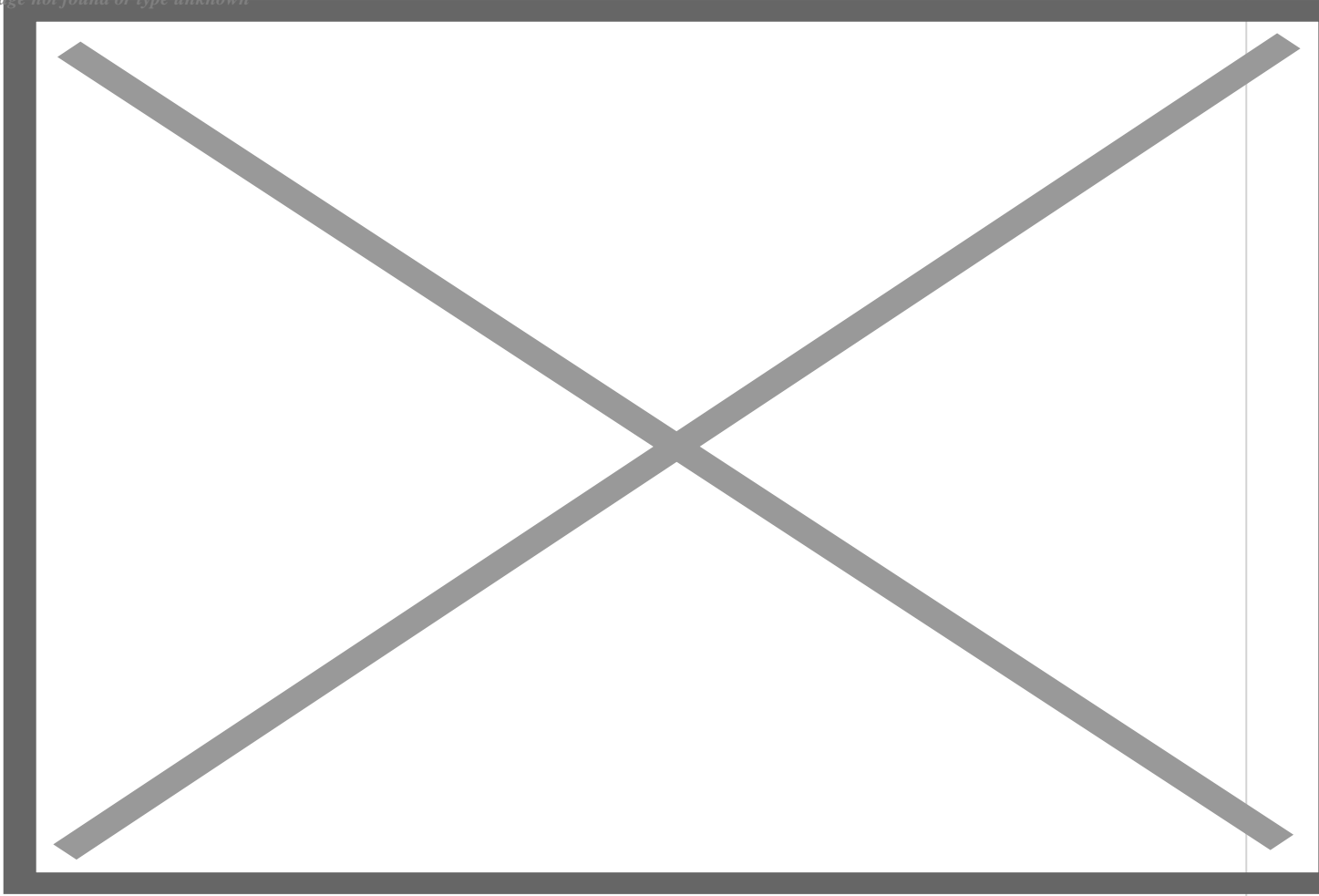


Officials sound alarm as Japan COVID cases hit record highs

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Tokyo reported 3,865 new cases in the past 24 hours, up from 3,177 on Wednesday and double the numbers a week ago [File: Kevin Coombs/Reuters]

Tokyo, July 30 (RHC)-- Japanese officials are sounding the alarm as Tokyo reports record-breaking coronavirus cases for the third straight day with the Olympics well under way. Tokyo reported 3,865 new cases in the past 24 hours, up from 3,177 on Wednesday and double the numbers a week ago.

"We have never experienced the expansion of infections of this magnitude," Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato told reporters on Thursday, adding that new cases were soaring not only in the Tokyo

area but across the country.

Japan has kept its cases and deaths lower than many other countries, but its seven-day rolling average is rising and now stands at 28 per 100,000 people nationwide and 88 per 100,000 in Tokyo, according to the health ministry.

This compares with 18.5 in the United States, 48 in Britain and 2.8 in India, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. The country's top health adviser Shigeru Omi also warned of the risk of putting the healthcare system under severe strain.

"If crisis awareness is not shared, sooner or later the pressure on the health system will become more serious," Omi said at a committee meeting in Parliament.

"Apart from vaccination, there are not many other factors to bring down the infections," he added. He said many citizens had now become accustomed to the coronavirus situation, which contributed to the rise in infections, on top of the spread of the more transmissible Delta variant. Other factors contributing to the spike are the holiday season and the Olympic Games, Omi said.

Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike noted that experts have projected cases in Tokyo could exceed 4,500 a day by mid-August. Tokyo has been under its fourth state of emergency since July 12, ahead of the Olympics, which began last Friday despite widespread public opposition and concern that they could worsen the outbreak.

People are still roaming the streets despite stay-at-home requests, making the emergency measures largely ineffective.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said his government will decide on Friday whether to expand the emergency measures. Local media reported that the government is expected to extend Tokyo's emergency measures until August 31 and add the capital's three neighbouring areas and Osaka.

Suga defended his virus measures and also denied the Olympics had anything to do with the record surge. Japan's vaccine minister, Taro Kono, said in an interview with The Associated Press on Wednesday that there is no evidence of the coronavirus spreading from Olympic participants to the general public.

"I don't think there have been any cases related to the Olympic Games. So we aren't worried about that issue," he said. Tokyo officials said on Thursday that two foreign Olympic athletes are currently hospitalised and 38 others are self-isolating at designated hotels in the city.

On Thursday, American double world champion pole vaulter Sam Kendricks was ruled out of competition in Tokyo after testing positive for COVID-19. A total of 193 people accredited for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics have now tested positive for COVID-19, organisers said on Thursday.

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