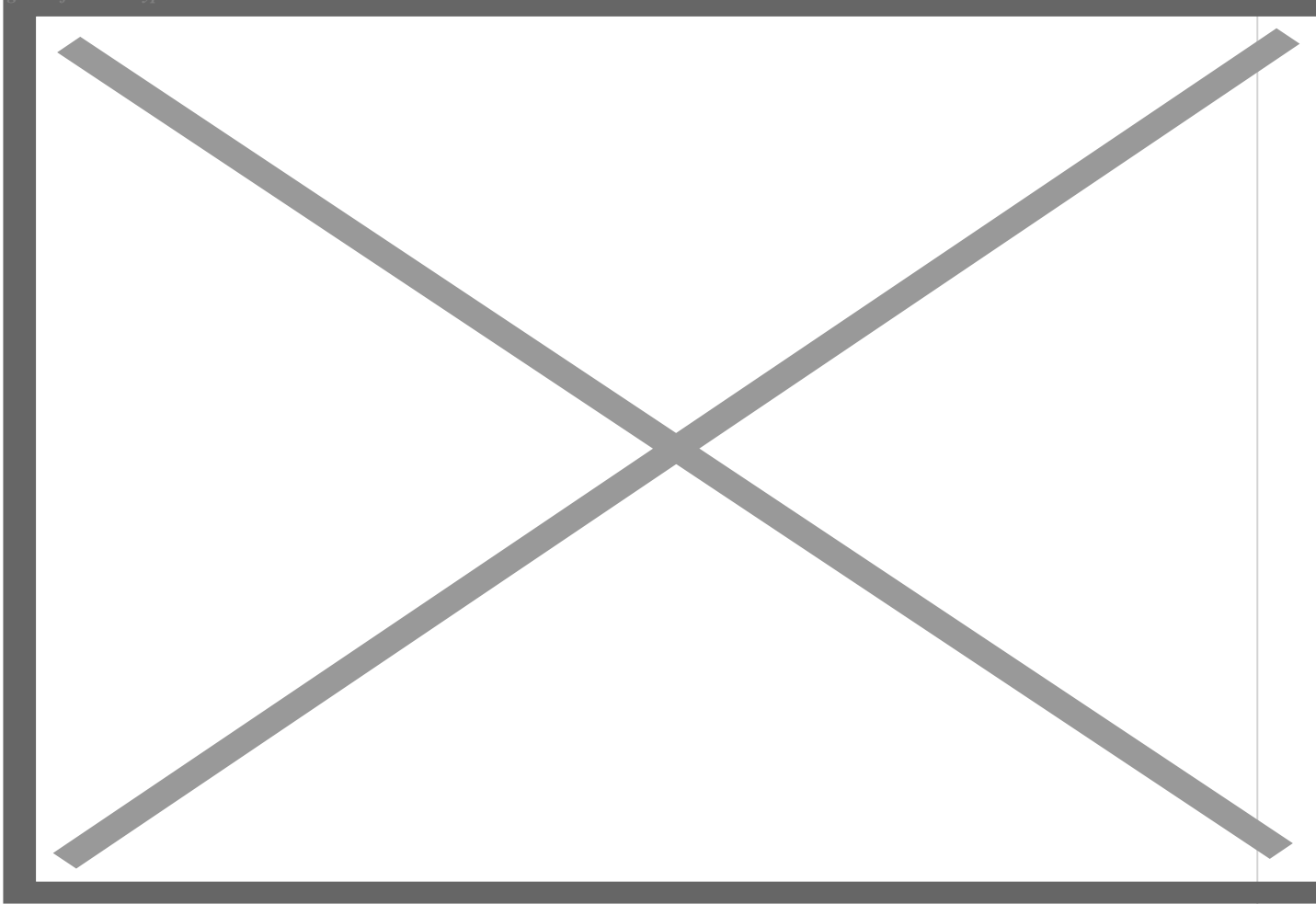


Japan to expand COVID restrictions amid huge surge in cases

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Commuters wearing face masks arrive at Shinagawa Station at the start of the working day amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, in Tokyo, Japan, August 2, 2021 [Kevin Coombs/Reuters]

Tokyo, August 5 (RHC)-- Japan is preparing to expand emergency restrictions to eight more prefectures to fight a surge in COVID-19 cases, as worries grow about strains on the medical system in Tokyo as it hosts the Olympics.

The planned move comes on Thursday as coronavirus infections surged at an unprecedented pace, overshadowing the Summer Games and driving doubts about Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's handling of the pandemic.

On Wednesday, Tokyo reported a record 4,166 new cases, while nationwide new cases topped 14,000. "New infections are rising at an unprecedentedly fast pace," Economic Minister Yasutoshi Nishimura told a panel of experts reviewing the proposal for expanded restrictions. "Not just in the national capital region, but starting with the Kansai region and northern Kanto region, the number of new infections has surged across the whole country at levels we have never seen before."

"The situation on the ground is extremely severe," he said, adding: "We are seeing clusters where we'd seldom seen them before, such as at department stores, hairdressers and cram schools."

The latest steps, to take effect from Sunday, mean more than 70 percent of Japan's population will be under some restrictions. Already, six prefectures including Tokyo are under full states of emergency, which will remain in place until August 31, while a further five are under less strict "quasi-emergency" directives.

But experts question whether the steps, which are mostly voluntary, will have much effect as people have grown weary of staying home even as the highly transmissible Delta variant spreads.

Since the beginning of this month, the Delta variant has made up roughly 90 percent of new cases in the Kanto region and 60 percent in the Kansai region, according to the National Institute for Infectious Diseases.

The decision to extend restrictions follows a sharp backlash against Suga's plan for COVID-19 patients to isolate at home with only those who are seriously ill or at risk of becoming so, admitted to hospital.

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