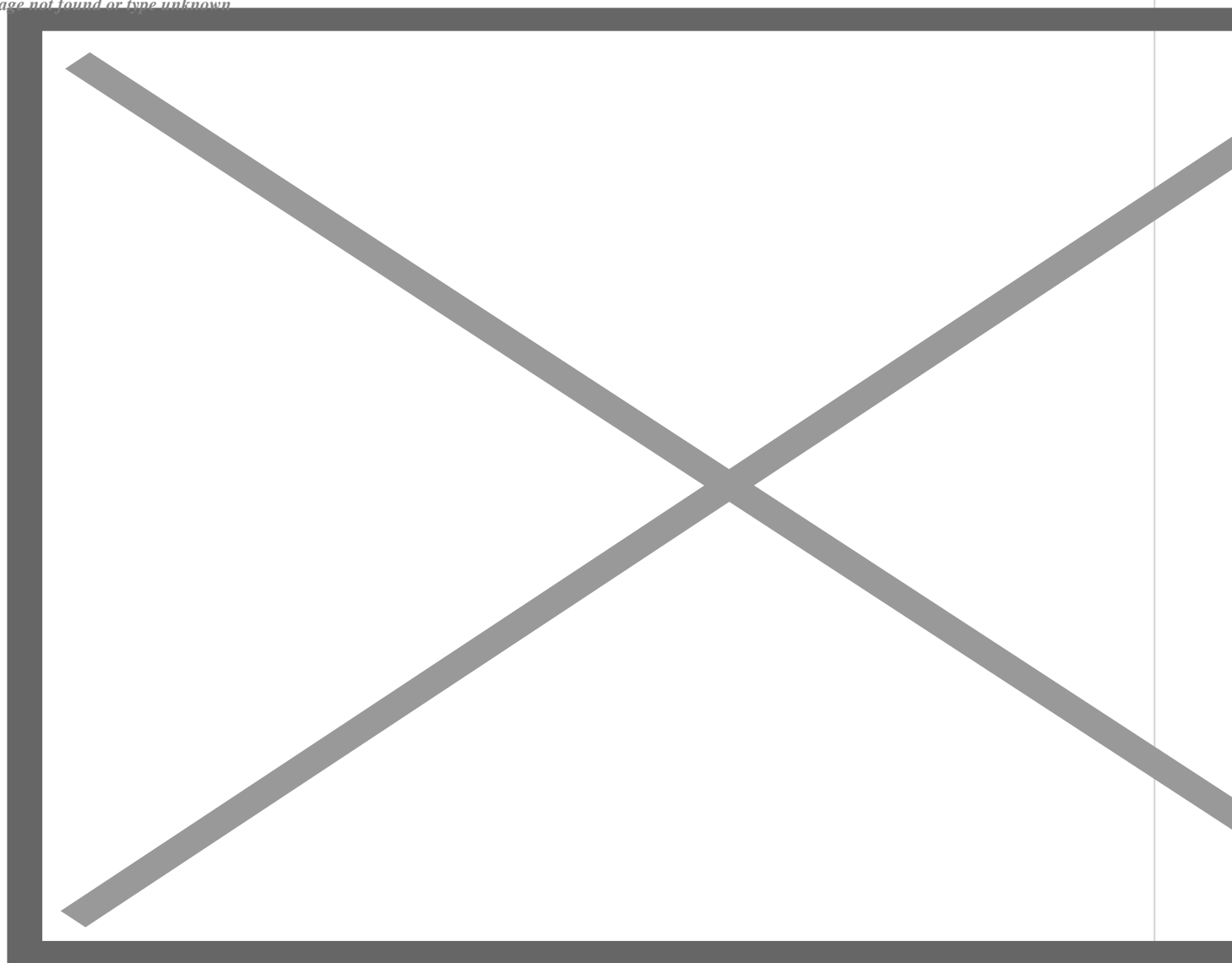


Japan issues third COVID emergency ahead of Olympics

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Japan has reported more than 550,000 coronavirus cases, including 9,805 deaths, as of Friday [Philip Fong/AFP]

Tokyo, April 23 (RHC)-- Japan has declared a third state of emergency for Tokyo and three western prefectures as the country struggles to contain a resurgent coronavirus pandemic just three months

before the Olympics.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga announced the emergency on Friday for Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and Hyogo from April 25 through May 11. The step is largely intended to be “short and intensive” to stop people from travelling and spreading the virus during Japan’s Golden Week holidays from late April through the first week of May, Suga said.

Japan has reported more than 550,000 coronavirus cases, including 9,805 deaths, as of Friday, since the start of the pandemic. But a recent uptick in cases has worried officials and medical professionals as the government and Olympic organisers insist the Games will go ahead in July and August this year.

Earlier, Japan’s minister for virus response, Yasutoshi Nishimura, warned of a “strong sense of crisis”, saying current restrictions were not sufficient. The measures will be tougher than Japan’s last state of emergency, imposed in parts of the country from January, but still far short of the lockdowns seen in some parts of the world.

Authorities want bars and restaurants to stop selling alcohol or close, and to shutter main commercial facilities like malls. Spectators will also be barred from sports events, which can continue behind closed doors, and remote working will be encouraged.

Although the measures start from Sunday, Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike urged residents to start taking precautions immediately, including avoiding drinking in the street after bars and restaurants close early. She urged businesses to turn their lights off in the evenings to encourage people to stay away.

“After 8 p.m., we ask that bright signage on streets, neon signs and illumination be turned off,” she said. “It will be dark at night, with only street lights on,” she added, to “curb the flow of people.”

On Friday, Tokyo logged 759 cases, while Osaka recorded 1,162 new infections, slightly down on record numbers earlier in the week. Authorities in Osaka have said health facilities there are already overwhelmed and beds for seriously ill patients are running short.

Officials insist the situation will not affect preparations for the Games, with Tokyo 2020 chief Seiko Hashimoto telling reporters on Friday that “we’re not thinking about cancellation.” “We’re thinking about how we can prepare in a way that prioritises safety and makes people feel it can be held safely, and makes them want it to be held,” said Hashimoto.

But the spike in infections is already disrupting everything from the Olympic Torch Relay – which has been forced off public roads in several regions – to test events and qualifiers. Australia’s diving team on Friday withdrew from the Diving World Cup scheduled for May in Tokyo, saying it was “not safe” to travel to Japan.

Japan’s vaccine program is moving slowly with just more than 1.5 million people given a first shot and only about 827,000 fully vaccinated.

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