

Japanese government facing growing criticism over Covid-19 outbreak

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe delivered a speech on Saturday to try to address the growing criticism surrounding his government's handling of the Covid-19 coronavirus outbreak. So far, there have been 259 confirmed cases of infection and six deaths. Twenty people are currently in critical condition. This excludes the 711 confirmed cases and six deaths aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship docked in Yokohama.

Abe's speech on Saturday contained little more than vague statements and proposals. He said, "Frankly, it isn't possible to win this fight with only the government's power. We must be resolved that the ongoing battle is critical and harsh. We are aware that we are causing trouble for the Japanese people but we also humbly ask cooperation from each and every person."

The prime minister promised to adopt an emergency spending package in the following ten days, worth 270 billion yen (\$US2.5 billion). This would be in addition to 15.3 billion yen (\$US141 million) made available in early February.

By contrast, Abe's cabinet in December approved another record military budget reaching 5.31 trillion yen (\$US49 billion). The budget has risen for seven consecutive years.

Numerous public facilities have been closed including baseball stadiums, theme parks, and national museums until at least mid-March. On February 28, Hokkaido Prefecture declared a state of emergency with Governor Naomichi Suzuki calling on people to avoid going outside. Hokkaido has had the largest number of confirmed infections at 72.

Abe has been accused of inaction and ignoring the spread of Covid-19 in Japan. "Where is the leadership?" asked emeritus professor at Columbia University Gerry Curtis, last week. "Even now, he's

not out there, not talking to the public and mobilizing people."

Koichi Nakano, a political science professor at Sophia University, accused Abe of being in "denial."

In mid-February, Abe's approval rating dropped 8.3 points from January to 41 percent, the sharpest fall in two years, not least of all due to fears of Covid-19's spread.

Indicating the lack of faith many have in Abe, Twitter user @shumi_wake suggested the prime minister was attempting to play down the number of infected patients. "Maybe the Japanese government wants to hold the Tokyo Olympics so they try to hide the number of infected people. Shinzo Abe is good at hiding."

The government had hoped that through the hosting of the Olympics and increased tourism, there would be a boost to the economy, which is currently suffering from the sales tax increase from 8 to 10 percent in October. In December, the economy contracted 6.3 percent from the previous quarter and economists are predicting another drop in the next quarter in part due to Covid-19 fears.

Bank of Japan (BoJ) Governor Haruhiko Kuroda said on Monday, "The BoJ will monitor developments carefully and strive to stabilize markets and offer sufficient liquidity via market operations and asset purchases." In other words, Tokyo will provide as big a financial cushion as necessary to bailout Japanese businesses.

For the broader population, the Japanese government's response has been a mixture of incompetence and indifference. The government did not announce basic guidelines for dealing with Covid-19 until February 25. These include advising people to avoid large gatherings and to stay home and

not visit hospitals if experiencing mild cold-like symptoms. Hospitals have even rejected people, refusing to test patients showing symptoms of the virus if they do not fall into one of two specific categories established by the Health Ministry: those who have come into contact with someone confirmed to have contracted Covid-19 and those who have traveled to infected areas of China and are showing symptoms.

The care of passengers aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship has also been described as “chaotic” by Kentaro Iwata, a professor at Kobe University Hospital, who was part of the medical team on the ship. The last members of the crew left the ship on Sunday, bringing to an end the quarantine. However, some passengers who previously tested negative and were allowed to return home have now tested positive for the virus, raising fears of a wider infection and prompting criticism over the handling of the quarantine.

Last Thursday, Abe suddenly announced that schools throughout Japan would close through April, a period covering the end of the current school year and the beginning of the next. The decision led to confusion and anger, particularly among teachers and working class families who do not have the resources to provide childcare. Education Minister Koichi Hagiuda walked back Abe’s announcement later saying it was not legally binding and therefore voluntary.

A special education teacher at a Tokyo elementary school called Abe’s decision a stunt. “I feel that the government decided to close schools as a ‘performance,’ knowing that the economic impact would be small,” she said.

Abe claimed in his speech Saturday that “a new subsidies program will be established” to help families who face a loss of income if they must stay home to take care of their children. However, past experiences with caring for victims of disasters make clear that Abe’s pledge means little.

Nine years after the devastating earthquake and tsunami in 2011 that struck Fukushima, and produced a nuclear disaster, more than 40,000 people still remain evacuees, living in temporary housing or with friends or family members. The construction of promised public housing has also been a drawn-out process that has not met the needs of all. Fukushima Prefecture even passed a motion last October to file a lawsuit to evict evacuees from public housing for not paying rent. The

affected households were not able to afford rent after losing their incomes in the disaster.

In other words, while the BoJ pledges immediate aid to big business, the world’s third largest economy is unable to make available the resources necessary to protect people and their livelihoods. No faith should be placed in Tokyo’s ability to handle the current Covid-19 outbreak or its long-term impact on the population. The response of the Japanese government makes clear the necessity for an internationally coordinated response to Covid-19 that is not beholden to the capitalist markets.



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