

After downplaying COVID-19 pandemic, Japan forced to postpone Olympics

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As the COVID-19 crisis has spread throughout the world, the various national ruling elites have focused their response on propping up the financial markets, while accepting that millions will contract the illness and perish. Japan's prime minister, Shinzo Abe, has responded in no less a criminal fashion. His government has continued to insist that the population has little to worry about despite the World Health Organization's declaration of a global pandemic.

For weeks, Abe downplayed the disease in an attempt to ensure that the 2020 Tokyo Olympics would be held this summer. He repeatedly stated that Japan would "continue to work towards holding the Olympics as planned."

Together with Abe, the governor of Tokyo, Yuriko Koike, stressed to reporters that cancellation of the summer games was "unthinkable." This was driven in large part by the desire to protect the massive state investment in the event. The government has already spent 3 trillion yen to build the infrastructure and prepare the city. On top of this is the vast scale of corporate profiteering bound up with the event and the geo-strategic importance of hosting the Olympics.

Abe's negligent attitude toward the pandemic and his effort to proceed on a "business as usual" basis sparked global outrage, with many countries demanding that the games be postponed to a future date. Discussing the decision to postpone the Olympics, International Olympic Committee (IOC) member Dick Pound told *USA Today*, "On the basis of the information the IOC has, postponement has been decided... The parameters going forward have not been determined, but the Games are not going to start on July 24, that much I know."

Abe had no choice but to accept the postponement and propose to hold the Olympics in the summer of

2021, which the committee accepted. It is estimated that the one-year delay will cost 300 billion yen.

The Abe administration has used the pandemic to implement undemocratic policies. The Japanese cabinet approved a bill to give the prime minister the ability to declare a state of emergency if and when the virus spreads throughout the country. In addition to ordering social distancing and stay-at-home measures necessitated by the pandemic, the bill gives the government the power to take over parcels of land and houses without the permission of the owners, restrict mail delivery, and take direct control of the press. Despite public criticism of these sweeping powers, little has been made of the authoritarian implications of the law by the Japanese media.

The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare has also played a role in downplaying the pandemic. It has been pointed out that Japan is not using its full capacity to test for the coronavirus. Nationwide capacity to conduct PCR tests is 8,000 a day, but on average only 1,190 had been carried out daily as of March 18.

"Just because we have capacity, it doesn't mean we need to use that capacity fully," Health Ministry official Yasuyuki Sahara said. "It isn't necessary to carry out tests on people who are just worried," he added. This flies in the face of the insistence of the World Health Organization and other scientific and medical authorities of the critical importance of mass testing.

The virus, which is particularly deadly among the elderly, will likely disproportionately affect Japan, which already faces a phenomenon of "super-aging" both in rural and urban areas, meaning that a comparatively larger proportion of its population is above 60. In Japan, people aged 65 and older make up a quarter of the population. According to 2014 estimates,

33 percent of the Japanese population is above the age of 60, 25.9 percent are aged 65 or above, and 12.5 percent are aged 75 or above.

The economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc on families and young people. Recent reports note that companies are retracting job offers. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare announced that at least 20 new high school and college graduates have had job offers rescinded by a total of 12 companies.

Since most companies demand that their employees arrive for work at a set time, workers are forced to ride packed trains to commute during rush hour.

In the face of the impending public health catastrophe, the minister of health, labor and welfare, Katsunobu Kato, callously commented, “I don’t use the train to commute, so I do not know the situation well, but I hear some people say that ‘the train is not that crowded.’” Many people reacted to this comment by Kato, pointing out his contempt for the welfare of the people.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has requested that all schools resume classes after spring break, as planned. The ministry released guidelines for re-opening schools that list three conditions to be avoided: (1) bad ventilation, (2) conversation and speech at close quarters, and (3) allowing many people to be within reach.

Many schools expressed concern since they do not have the resources to follow the guidelines. Most classrooms are overcrowded, with more than 30 students, and there is not enough room for students to spread out in accordance with the guidelines. No real measures to ensure the safety of students have been implemented by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.



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