Japanese PM imposes coronavirus state of emergency

Peter Symonds
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After resisting such moves for weeks, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced on Tuesday that his government would impose a state of emergency in selected areas of the country, including the capital Tokyo, to try to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

Abe emphasised that the state of emergency was not a lockdown, that public transport would continue and that prefectural governors could only request, not order, businesses to close and people work from home and avoid going out.

The declaration came only after warnings from health officials that the number of confirmed cases in Japan threatened to spiral out of control and overwhelm the country's hospitals. In the past fortnight the number of confirmed cases has more than trebled from 1,693 to 5,530 yesterday, and the number of deaths has nearly doubled from 52 to 99.

Abe was also under pressure to act from the Tokyo governor and political rival Yuriko Koike whose administration was facing a growing number of cases. Confirmed cases in the capital trebled in 10 days to top 1,500. The city reported a record 181 new infections on Thursday.

Since the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in mid-January, the Abe government's response has been minimal. The relatively low number of confirmed cases led to various theories that because of cultural factors—such as bowing rather than shaking hands and the widespread, every-day use of face masks—Japan had avoided the worst of the pandemic.

In reality, one of the chief reasons for the low numbers was the lack of testing. A day earlier, Abe announced that the testing capacity would be increased to 20,000 a day. However, the number of tests has rarely reached half the existing testing capacity of 7,500 tests a day.

Overall, as of April 6, Japan had conducted only about 45,000 tests, far less than many other countries, including South Korea, which has carried out around half a million tests. Much of the testing has been based on the theory that the pandemic only occurred in specific clusters, so little or no broad testing has been done to identify the wider rates of infection.

Masahiro Kami, head of the Medical Governance Research Institute, told the *Financial Times*: "It's very hard to know if the state of emergency is justified or whether it will be effective because Japan hasn't done the testing."

The state of emergency, which came into force on Wednesday, covers seven prefectures that include the major cities of Tokyo, Kobe, Osaka and Yokohama. The range of businesses that are likely to be exempt from requests to close is broader than in many countries and covers factories, hotels and restaurants as well as supermarkets, pharmacies, convenience stores, railways and bus services.

With considerable confusion surrounding the measures, the media is already reporting that Tokyo's crowded commuter trains continue to run on some busy lines and as many people went to work as usual. "It's unavoidable that people have to come out for work," Risa Tanaka, a mask-wearing office worker near Tokyo's Shinjuku station, told Reuters.

The state of emergency will last for a month unless renewed. In announcing it, Abe claimed that the measures would reduce social interactions by 70 to 80 percent. He also suggested that "the expansion of infections can be turned to a decline in two weeks."

Medical experts, however, rejected these claims.

Kenji Shibuya, director of the Institute for Population Health at King's College London, told the *New York Times*: "Japan has been screwing up." He

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warned that the number of confirmed cases was “just the tip of the iceberg,” and a surge of cases could cause Tokyo’s health care system to collapse.

According to the Japanese Society of Intensive Care Medicine, Japan has just five intensive care beds per 100,000 people, compared with close to 30 in Germany and 12 in Italy.

Dr. Keiji Fukuda, director of the School of Public Health at the University of Hong Kong, told the *New York Times*: “For most countries, it’s not ‘are they going to dodge the bullet? ... It’s just ‘when is it going to come?’ This is true for Japan, too.”

Like its counterparts internationally, the Japanese government has been preoccupied with saving the capitalist economy rather than the lives and well-being of its citizens. As he made the emergency declaration on Tuesday, Abe declared: “The Japanese economy is facing its largest postwar crisis.”

In the name of combatting the coronavirus, the Japanese cabinet this week passed the country’s largest-ever stimulus package, worth 108 trillion yen or about $US1 trillion—a massive 20 percent of GDP. This includes previously approved stimulus measures in December when the economy was being hit by the US-China trade conflict and a major typhoon in October.

To boost consumer spending and help prop up businesses, the package includes a 300,000-yen ($2,750) handout to households that have lost income due to the virus, and 2 million yen, along with delayed tax payments, for businesses impacted by the virus. A second phase will include funds to boost spending and travel as the pandemic eases.

Abe also downplayed COVID-19 as his government and the Tokyo prefecture desperately sought to ensure that this year’s Tokyo Olympics went ahead.

Tim Hornyak, a commentator in the Canadian-based *National Post*, noted this week: “As daily new infections wavered around 30, Japan’s Olympics minister said cancelling the event was ‘inconceivable’—until March 24, when Abe and the International Olympic Committee agreed to postpone the Games until 2021. Almost on cue, new daily coronavirus diagnoses nearly doubled. They’re now over 300.”

Even as he imposed the state of emergency, Abe insisted that he did not have the legal and constitutional powers to compulsorily shut down businesses, or to insist that people work from home or restrict their movements.

Around the world, the ruling classes are exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need to impose shutdowns, quarantining and social distancing, to justify far-reaching expansion of police-state measures that will in the future be used against the working class.

Abe and his right-wing Liberal Democratic Party have long called for the revision of Japan’s postwar constitution to remove any impediments to Japanese imperialism to wage war and make deep inroads into basic democratic rights. By claiming he does not have enough powers to counter COVID-19, Abe is adding to his push for major constitutional change, which has eluded him to date.

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