

Japanese prime minister declares state of emergency amid rapid spread of COVID-19

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The Japanese government of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga declared a state of emergency last Thursday in response to the raging COVID-19 pandemic. It is being applied to the Tokyo, Chiba, Kanagawa, and Saitama Prefectures. The governors of Osaka, Kyoto, and Hyogo have asked to be included.

Tokyo witnessed 2,447 COVID-19 cases on Thursday, setting a record high. The Tokyo metropolitan area is a densely packed city of more than 38 million where social distancing is difficult, especially for workers and students relying on packed public transport. On Saturday, the number of daily new cases nationally reached 7,855, also a record high.

Japan's state of emergency law, which was revised last March, allows the government to order people to stay home, close schools, and cancel events. It can also request businesses shorten their hours. Tokyo is asking people to remain at and work from home when possible and for restaurants to close by 8pm.

While restrictions are necessary to combat the spread of the virus, the government is exploiting the crisis to push forward its law-and-order agenda.

Currently, government's COVID-19 orders are not enforceable with penalties. As such, Tokyo has argued for inserting the law into the constitution. This is not a response to the pandemic, but instead has long been part of the agenda of the right-wing nationalists who want a complete revision of Japan's post-war constitution, including the further restriction or elimination of democratic rights.

Indicating the political nature of the government's restrictions, schools are being kept open, despite the danger, in order to ensure parents can still go to work.

A Tokyo resident explained to the *World Socialist Web Site* the danger students, teachers, and their families are being placed in to ensure schools remain

open, saying, "There was a COVID case in my daughter's school. They only had those classes of the same grade rest for a day, and everything was back to normal already from the following day. There was no testing either. They require someone to have spent more than 15 minutes and had been within a meter or so of the confirmed case, without a mask on, in order for someone to receive a test. It is ridiculous."

The healthcare system is severely strained. Fumie Sakamoto, who works as an infection control manager in Tokyo's St. Luke's International Hospital, told the *New York Times*, "We are having too many cases to trace right now, and the state of emergency is coming too late." She added, "We can't take any more patients at this time. I think a lot of hospitals that take in COVID patients are in the same situation right now."

This also means that COVID-19 patients may not be able to access care, but others suffering from separate illnesses and injuries could be denied treatment. This is an indictment of the entire political establishment in Japan. The pandemic has been raging globally for a year now, yet Tokyo and the regional governments allowed the situation in the country to get out of control, while doing little to nothing to prepare for a surge in COVID-19 cases.

Instead, the Suga government and that of his predecessor, Shinzo Abe, have prioritized keeping the economy open and workers on the job in order to allow big business to continue to extract surplus value from the working class.

The government promoted its "Go to..." campaigns, which include "Go to travel" and "Go to eat," beginning in July and October respectively. People, backed by government subsidies, are encouraged to travel domestically and eat out at restaurants, so as to boost the economy. "Go to eat" was suspended on

December 18, but “Go to travel” was only halted on December 28, weeks after the pandemic was growing out of control.

Furthermore, when the pandemic first began, former Prime Minister Abe downplayed the danger, hoping to still hold the Summer Olympic Games slated to take place in Tokyo, which the government sees as a boon for the economy.

While the Olympics were eventually postponed, Suga pledged in a New Year statement to hold them this year, claiming his government was making “preparations to realize a safe and secure tournament.” His government’s handling of the pandemic belies this statement.

The Olympics could easily become a series of “superspreader” events. Japan may not begin to distribute the COVID-19 vaccine until the end of February at the earliest, and undoubtedly there will be many people coming from overseas without being vaccinated. Tokyo and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) are downplaying the danger, and presenting the games as the “light at the end of the tunnel,” in the words of IOC President Thomas Bach.

The pandemic, however, is far from over. Globally, there have been more than 90 million COVID-19 cases and more than 1.9 million deaths. The danger is compounded by the total lack of preparation in countries to acquire the necessary amounts of vaccines to give to their entire populations and to prepare proper distribution methods.

In the United States as of Friday, for example, only about 6.7 million people had received at least one dose of the vaccine, falling far short of Washington’s pledge to inoculate 20 million people by the end of December. Only about 151,000 people had received the two shots that are necessary.

Tokyo claims it has secured the rights to enough vaccines for its entire population of 126 million. However, the vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech is currently the only one under regulatory review, with others only in domestic trial phases or yet to begin local trials. Significantly, the vaccine being developed by Japan’s Novavax, from which Tokyo intends to acquire 250 million doses, has not yet entered clinical trials.

Masayuki Imagawa, the head of the Japan Vaccine Business unit at Takeda Pharmaceutical, told Reuters

last week, “To achieve the needed production volume, there are various factories to be contracted and tech transfers to be done all over the world. And whether that can all really come together to secure enough supply is a remaining challenge.”

All of this casts doubt on the ability of Tokyo to provide its population with a vaccine in a timely manner. It further exposes the irrationality of the capitalist system, which places barriers to international cooperation as rival nation states pursue their economic and strategic interests at the expense of the majority of the world’s population.



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