

Japan's COVID-19 crisis in the wake of the Olympics

Emily Ochiai
6 September 2021

In the aftermath of the Tokyo Summer Olympics, a predictable COVID-19 disaster continues to unfold in Japan, demonstrating the Japanese government's complete indifference to containing the virus. As of August 30, 2,075 COVID-19 patients nationwide are in critical condition. The number of patients on respirators nationwide exceeded 900, far exceeding the numbers in the third and fourth wave of infection. More than 118,000 people are self-isolating at home.

In Tokyo alone, 4,351 people are currently hospitalized with COVID-19, 267 of them critically ill. Some 17,603 people self-isolate at home, 2,126 in hotels, and 6,254 people are wait-listed to be admitted into a hospital. Even with these horrific numbers, experts warn that the official number of confirmed cases is significantly underestimated due to the slow and inefficient testing system, citing a high positivity rate of over 20 percent. They warned at the Tokyo COVID-19 Monitoring Committee Meeting on August 20 that "infection will rampage through the nation to a disastrous level. This is an emergency."

This disaster in Japan is a direct result of a series of decisions made by the government of Yoshihide Suga and his predecessor Shinzo Abe, whose sole objective has been to maximize profit for the ruling class, not to save lives. They proceeded to hold the Tokyo Olympics Games, ignoring the countless warnings from scientists, criticism from the medical workers, and mass opposition from people all over the world. Thousands of workers and youth protested to stop the tidal wave of infections and death pummeling the hospitals. During the Games, Tokyo recorded its highest number of daily cases, at over 5,000.

Despite the state of emergency that persisted throughout the Olympic Games, the Suga administration has criminally proceeded to hold the Paralympics Games as well and has invited more than 130,000 elementary school students as spectators into the stadiums in what can only be described as an effort mirroring the Swedish herd immunity model to purposefully infect masses of children.

With the surge in cases and the sharp increase in serious cases from the spread of the Delta variant, the healthcare system in Japan has been in a deep crisis for months. There is a serious shortage of all resources, beds, staff and respirators. The bed occupancy rates for critically ill patients and ICU beds are 97

percent in Tokyo, 91 percent in Kanagawa, 82 percent in Chiba, 69 percent in Saitama, and 89 percent in Okinawa. On August 27, one of the major hospitals accepting COVID-19 patients in Osaka declared bankruptcy.

The crisis in the hospitals is catastrophic. Between August 16 and August 22, 250 patients spent more than three hours in the ambulance before reaching a hospital that would accept them in Tokyo. This is more than 30 percent of all patients taken by the ambulance. There were 121 instances in which patients were required to wait longer than five hours.

Additionally, 1,160 instances occurred in which the ambulance did not transport the patient to a hospital at all, meaning ambulances and first responders are being asked to make life-and-death decisions. These cases include cases where the health center decided the patient should self-quarantine, as well as those in which patients gave up looking for a hospital and requested to be taken home. A tragic case was reported where a woman in her twenties was rushed to the hospital in Tokyo after her blood oxygen level fell below the critical condition threshold. She waited hours in an ambulance while the staff looked for a hospital willing to accept her. Devastated by the situation, she told the staff, "I have no choice; I am going to give up," and returned home despite her worsening condition.

With the critical shortage of hospital beds, an increasing number of people are being forced to remain at home and are denied medical care. Currently, over 118,000 people nationwide are self-isolating at home. Health centers are stretched to their limit and are often unable to monitor the self-isolating patients.

Self-isolating COVID-19 patients dying alone at home have become a frequent story in the media. On August 30, a self-isolating patient in her sixties in Chiba Prefecture was found dead approximately three days after her death. The health center classified her as low priority because she was diagnosed as having a mild condition and lived with her husband. However, her husband was hospitalized with a critical injury and was not present with her. His speech was impaired, and he could not be identified by the hospital. The health center was unable to contact the woman about her husband and thus visited her home, where they found her dead.

According to NHK, a man in his twenties was also discovered dead in his home in the Chiba prefecture while self-isolating. He tested positive and had a fever of 104 degrees. However, the doctor advised him to self-isolate at home. The health center explained that, due to the short time period between his diagnosis and death, they did not have time to initiate contact with him. This is the second death in the Chiba prefecture of COVID patients in their twenties. The young man's daughter found her father dead.

Another man in his sixties who was self-isolating at home was discovered dead. Even though the man had a preexisting medical condition (diabetes), he was denied hospitalization and told to self-isolate at home after the Saitama Prefecture determined his symptoms were "mild." His case was transferred to a 'self-isolating patient care center.' For 10 consecutive days, the center was unable to contact him. His wife, who was also COVID-19 positive, was self-isolating with him. However, her health was worsening, and she was unable to call for help for her husband.

On August 19, a self-isolating pregnant woman lost her baby after being forced to deliver prematurely at home alone without any medical assistance. She was classified as low priority by the Chiba prefecture and therefore was denied in-patient care.

Healthcare workers are continuing to fight against the criminal policy of the Suga administration and are voicing their criticism on social media. A nurse declared on social media, "Many people are dying. They could have been saved if we had proper and sufficient resources. It is wrong to reduce the number of beds and health care workers," criticizing the Japanese government's decades-long plan to reduce health care costs. Another explained the situation at the front line stating, "We did not have enough resources to begin with. With the COVID-19 pandemic, it is impossible. We do not have enough beds. We do not have enough nurses."

A number of health care workers on Twitter spearheaded a social media strike using the hashtag # ?????????? meaning "open an Extraordinary Diet [Parliament] session and avoid health care crisis." One declared, "There are more than 135,000 COVID patients left at home. Every day we have self-isolating patients die alone at home. It is clearly an emergency, and we shouldn't be demanding an Extraordinary Diet session," questioning the government's complete indifference to human lives. Another stated, "They reduced workers at health centers to half and don't pay even 1 yen. This is what the LPD did to us," expressing her anger towards not only the Suga administration but all the previous administrations. Another expressed her criticism of the government: "People cannot get tested. They can't connect to the Health Center. Can't be admitted to a hospital. No contact tracing is done. This is all because the government reduced the funding for health centers. The government must take responsibility for reducing the number of health centers to one per designated city."

With increasing reports of self-isolating COVID-19 patients' deaths, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan asked the government to release information on the total number of deaths among those self-isolating. The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare official answered, "There are many cases that we do not have a grasp of. So, we do not have a grasp of the comprehensive situation."

The Japanese government and mass media have been relentless in their efforts to blame young people, who they claim do not take the pandemic seriously, for the spread. This has been bound up with a cynical media campaign urging young people to get vaccinated. In reality, for young people to receive the limited number of vaccines, workers and youth must enter into a lottery. On August 28, Tokyo set up a walk-in vaccination lottery site. More than 2,200 people, primarily young people, lined up hoping to get vaccinated. Of the 2,200, only 354 "won" the vaccination ticket.

These numerous tragedies were entirely preventable. Public health experts have been warning about the risk of holding the Olympics Games, an event that catalyzed a massive surge of infection. The Games were highly unpopular, with more than 80 percent of the population opposing the event. More than 460,000 people all over the world signed a petition on Change.org calling to cancel the Tokyo Olympics to protect lives. Countless protests erupted all over Japan demanding to cancel the Olympics.

Health care systems are on the verge of collapse all over the world. The situation is particularly dire in the United States, the epicenter of global capitalism. As a direct result of the criminal campaign to reopen schools, pediatric intensive care units and hospitals across the country are filling up and reaching their capacity. Nurses are quitting and retiring as a result of exhaustion and demoralization caused by the crisis. Profit-driven policies allowed the virus to spread and mutate into more contagious, vaccine-resistant strains. All workers across the globe must join the struggle to reject the ruling class's promotion of endemicity that we must "learn to live with the virus," and demand a scientific approach to eradicate COVID-19.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact