

COVID-19 danger persists in Japan as Omicron variant takes hold

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As the COVID-19 pandemic worsens around the world, Japan appears to be enjoying a respite. Appearances, however, are deceptive. In fact, Tokyo's policy towards the pandemic is preparing a new wave of infections as the first cases of community transmission of the highly infectious Omicron variant are recorded.

Throughout the course of the pandemic, more than 1.7 million people have been infected and more than 18,300 people have died in Japan. Infections reached a peak of more than 20,000 a day in August but have since plunged. On Sunday the number of new infections was just 263 across Japan. The number of seriously ill COVID-19 patients was 38, up by one from the previous day. No deaths were reported.

Scientists are investigating various hypotheses to explain the sharp drop in cases and deaths. However, as Taro Yamamoto, professor of global health at Nagasaki University's Institute of Tropical Medicine, told the *Washington Post*, "Honestly, we do not know the exact reason behind the sudden drop in COVID deaths in Japan."

Part of the explanation lies in the limited character of testing and contact tracing in Japan. Michinori Kohara, a researcher at the Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Medical Science, published a study last month on underreported and asymptomatic positive cases. He told the *Post* that the official figures probably only recorded a quarter to one tenth of the actual number of cases up until recently when testing became more widely available.

Another factor was the response of ordinary people to the very high numbers of infections following the Summer Olympics when case numbers hit a record high of 26,184 on August 22 and the hospitals were overwhelmed. The crisis led to widespread support for

social distancing and mask wearing.

Medical professor Yoshiaki Katsuda told *News Post Seven*, "There has been a decrease in people visiting high-risk areas with a history of breakouts like the mall. The percentage of those vaccinated increased. And air ventilation efforts have been enforced. All of these factors could have led to the decrease in case numbers."

Opinion polls reveal that people are taking precautions. In a poll reported on December 20, *FNN Prime Online* news revealed that 87.4 percent of respondents expressed concern about another wave of COVID-19 and nearly 80 percent stated they would avoid traveling or visiting family during the holiday season due to the new Omicron variant threat.

Nearly 80 percent of the population intended to receive the third dose of the vaccine. At this stage, however, less than 1 percent of the population has received a booster shot.

Large COVID-19 outbreaks are continuing. The Okinawa prefectural government stated on December 22 that over 223 people tested positive during an eight-day period at Camp Hansen, a United States Marine Corps base. This includes five confirmed cases, including two Japanese workers, of the Omicron variant. An employee at another US base, Camp Schwab in Nago, Okinawa, also tested positive for the Omicron variant. Dozens of factory workers in Ota, Gunma Prefecture have also tested positive for the virus in December.

As of December 23, there are over 200 confirmed infection cases of the Omicron variant throughout Japan, including two workers at Kansai Airport's quarantine facility. Four cases of Omicron infection have been reported in Osaka, a prefecture that was the epicenter of Japan's fourth wave of COVID-19 infection in May, resulting in a devastating healthcare

crisis. This includes a school teacher, a woman in her 30s and a child under ten, all of whom were hospitalized. In addition, untraceable Omicron infections have been discovered in Tokyo, Kyoto, and Fukuoka.

Professor of infectious disease Kazuhiro Tateda at Toho University warned in an interview with national broadcaster NHK, “Considering that there will be increased interaction and gatherings with the holiday season and the decreased efficacy of the vaccine with more than six months after the vaccines were administered, there are minimal factors that would reduce the infection.”

According to research by the Nagoya Institute of Technology, it is estimated that daily infections will rise to 3,000 by the end of January 2022 and more than 3,700 cases by mid-February.

Koji Wada, a professor of public health at the International University of Health and Welfare and member of the government’s COVID response panel, told the *Japan Times*, “The central government remains focused on protecting the border but it needs to shift to a different response under the assumption that the [Omicron] variant will spread domestically.” But, he added rather ominously, “that shift has not been made yet.”

In response to reports of the Omicron variant, the Japanese government has shut its borders. On November 27, it imposed an entry ban on people coming from six countries including South Africa. It then extended the ban to three more African nations the following day before expanding the restrictions to include all foreigners on November 30.

The border controls have been bound up with attempts by the ruling class to paint the pandemic as a “foreign” problem. In June last year, then Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso declared that the Japanese “*modo*” protected the population from COVID-19. The term evokes Japanese nationalism and ethnic superiority and implies that Japan’s cultural standards are more advanced than “barbaric” foreigners.

In September as the latest wave began to subside, Aso boasted, “The coronavirus has been resolved in some way or another, and the international community’s evaluation [of Japan] is extremely high.” His comments are part of the government’s efforts to lull the population into a false sense of security and to herd

people back to work so as to boost profits for big business.

While the government last week revised its growth estimate for the 2022 fiscal year upwards to 3.2 percent, the revised economic data for the third quarter this year showed the economy shrank by 3 percent on an annualized basis.



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