

International

Japan expected to lift emergency in most areas except Tokyo

Emergency gives governors more authority to tell people to stay home

TOKYO: Japan is expected to lift a state of emergency across a large part of the country yesterday but the capital Tokyo will likely remain under restrictions until there is a convincing containment of the coronavirus.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is scheduled to hold a news conference at 6 p.m. (0900 GMT) when he is expected to announce the lifting of the emergency in 39 of Japan's 47 prefectures, but not in Tokyo.

The world's third-largest economy declared a nationwide state of emergency a month ago, urging citizens to reduce person-to-person contact by 80% in an effort to slow the pace of new coronavirus infections and ease the strain on medical services.

The government had said it would reassess the situation in mid-May. Abe, like leaders everywhere, is striving to strike a balance between damage to the economy from prolonged shutdowns and the need to contain the virus.

Economists said normalisation would be gradual as the government keeps a wary eye on the possibility of a second wave of infections as seen in countries such as South Korea and China.

"The focus is whether the government will lift the emergency in the big areas such as Tokyo and Osaka before the end of May, as was initially planned," said Atsushi Takeda, chief economist at Itochu Research Institute.

"If it does, economic recovery will likely be faster than previously estimated." The emergency gives governors more authority to tell people to stay at home and to close schools and businesses, but there is no penalty for non-compliance. Some non-essential businesses, even in areas hit hard by the coronavirus, have started to reopen ahead of the government's review, and the scope of restrictions has varied across the country.

The emergency is also expected to remain in force in Osaka, Japan's second-largest metropolis, but its governor has announced criteria for gradually lifting some restraints on businesses including eateries and bars. The 39 prefectures in which the emergency is expected to be lifted account for 54% of Japan's population.

Waiting

The greater Tokyo area, where the emergency is expected to remain in force, represents



TOKYO: Women wearing face masks are seen on a street in Tokyo yesterday. —AFP

about a third of the economy. "Tokyo is the heart of the Japanese economy. It's like driving a car with three wheels," said Jesper Koll, chief executive of asset manager WisdomTree Japan.

The government is set to add four economists to its advisory panel for combating the epidemic and another review will be conducted again in about a week. — Reuters

Typhoon forces evacuations in virus-hit Philippines

TOKYO: A powerful typhoon hit the central Philippines yesterday, forcing a complicated and risky evacuation for tens of thousands already hunkered down at home during the coronavirus pandemic.

At least 200,000 people live in coastal areas or flimsy homes in the province near where the storm, called Typhoon Vongfong, made landfall with fierce winds and heavy rain.

Tens of millions more live along the typhoon's path, which is expected to take it near the densely populated capital Manila.

Because of the twin threat of the storm and the virus, evacuation centres in the central Philippines will only accept half their capacity and evacuees will have to wear facemasks.

The surge of people and limited space mean authorities have asked 47 big churches in the area to accept people fleeing the typhoon, which is the first of the season.

"We will be overwhelmed so we're expanding our evacuation to include churches," said Cedric Daep, disaster chief in central Albay province.

Vongfong is packing gusts up to 190 kilometres (120 miles) an hour as well as drenching rains that could cause flooding and landslides, the national weather agency said.

Areas in the typhoon's path are under varying levels of virus quarantine, yet many people are staying at home to avoid infection. — AFP

Manila cruise flotilla offers crew confinement in comfort

MANILA: In the past few weeks, Manila Bay in the Philippines has been transformed into the world's biggest parking lot for cruise ships, none of which have any guests.

More than 20 vessels with a combined volume of about 2 million tonnes are clustered off the coast of the capital, awaiting coronavirus clearance for more than 5,300 Philippine staff to return home from abandoned cruises, with no guarantee of a job at sea again. More ships are set to join the flotilla, says the coast guard, which has been shuttling between ships to administer 4,991 virus tests for crew quarantined for the 14 days mandatory for repatriates. No suspected cases have been reported.

Crew told Reuters they were bored, lonely or frustrated being so close to home, but felt fortunate to be confined to their cabins in comfort, knowing that thousands of Philippine returnees are in tougher quarantine conditions elsewhere.

"Each person is staying in a suite room - We feel like the guests now," joked Michael Torralba Martinez, speaking from one of the cabins that he normally cleans.

"We feel safer here ... Standards are strict in ships when it comes to cleanliness and sanitation," he said in an online chat. Martinez, 33, and the father of two, gave Reuters a virtual tour of his room, one of 1,011 on the 15-deck Sun Princess, where 225 quarantined Philippine staff were being served by colleagues from countries such as China, India and Indonesia.

He displayed photographs of room-service meals, his double bed, balcony and flatscreen television, plus daily puzzles and activities like origami and bingo, to keep entertained in rooms guarded by security staff.

"If someone is caught leaving the room, quarantine is back to

day zero for everyone. So no one dares," he added. At least 15 ships in the Manila flotilla are owned by subsidiaries of cruise giant Carnival Corp, including Costa Cruises, Cunard, P&O Cruises Australia and Princess Cruises, of which three ships were hotbeds for infections. Those firms did not immediately respond to questions from Reuters. The return is bittersweet for some, a chance to be home again with less risk of prolonged exposure to an outbreak, but soon jobless and facing dim employment prospects in an industry brought to a virtual standstill by outbreaks, travel bans and flight cuts.

'Happy and sad'

"When I learned we'll be sent back home, I was happy and sad at the same time. Sad because I'll lose my job, but happy because I can be with my family," said Jenison Herrera of the housekeeping staff of the Queen Elizabeth. The ship has been quarantined since April 20 and without passengers since March 14, a month into Herrera's nine-month contract, when owners in Australia decided to halt services and sail home the 530 Philippine crew. "Those who are not in quarantine are the ones who give our needs. We call them 'frontliners'," Herrera 33, said of colleagues. "Even the highest positions in the ship."

It is too soon to gauge the impact of the virus on the estimated 500,000 Philippine seafarers, who sent home \$6.5 billion in 2019, a fifth of the country's remittance income, the central bank says.

Ace Rodrin Catibayan, 34, a waiter on the Costa Venezia, is awaiting the outcome of on-board tests. Although he is certain those are negative, he is worried about his income and possible stigma at home from the attention focused on cruise outbreaks.

"For sure it would take time before we can go onboard again. It would be a long wait for us to make a living," he said. "I'll try to apply again or start a small business. But I really want to go back on the ship because I earn higher here."

Jose Albar Kato, who heads the Philippines' International Maritime Association and its federation for seafarers' employers, was not surprised to see the giant huddle off Manila of cruise ships, each the length of two to three soccer fields. — Reuters