
Coronavirus: Japanese government measures to counter the contagion. Schools closed and telework

According to official reports on Covid19 released on March 5 by the Japanese government, a total of 1,056 people have contracted the virus, 346 of whom were infected in Japan, 696 were passengers and crew members of the Diamond Princess, and 14 returned on charter flights from abroad. Of these 1,056, 12 died. Yet the opposition parties, and especially public opinion in Japan, suspect that these figures don't reflect the real situation. These doubts are corroborated by the fact that *the complicated and rigid procedures required for testing for the virus limit its detection, failing to provide a true picture of the spread of the epidemic*. The press has reported that many citizens with high fever, cough and pneumonia symptoms, after the first telephone consultation with dedicated coronavirus helpline services, are not required medical examination at the few centres authorised to screen for the presence of the viral infection. Masahiro Kami, doctor and director of the Medical Governance Research Institute, NPO, also commented in a statement to the press that "the criteria preventing testing except when there are very serious symptoms appear strange. The government seems to be ignoring the need to provide adequate responses to patients' concerns." Amid criticism and controversy, therefore, government leader Shinzo Abe is addressing this problem and has decided to cope with the *Shingata koronairusu* - the new coronavirus - emergency through measures with major impact on the country. These provisions, on the one hand, aim to limit the spread of the virus in a nation with more than 126 million inhabitants, 20.7% of whom are over 70 years of age, and on the other, to convey the image of a Japan that is capable of rising to the challenge of the next Olympics, the postponement of which would be a serious blow to Japanese economy. The anticipated closing of elementary, middle and high schools at national level and the government's appeal to companies to change working habits by increasing telework are two measures that have obliged a country that is very attached to tradition and reluctant to sudden changes, to face a dramatic transformation in two areas traditionally considered fundamental, untouchable and unshakable pillars of Japanese society: school and work. The request made by Prime Minister Abe to terminate the school year on 2 March, which in the Land of the Rising Sun starts on 8 April and ends in mid-March, has taken by surprise 47 prefectures, teachers, students and families. In fact, if all goes well, school attendance will be suspended for more than a month, *affecting the lifestyle and habits of families that, by culture and tradition, are not accustomed to such long periods of rest*. In fact, families entrust and delegate the personal and civic education of their children to educational institutions, thereby making schools the primary educational agency of young people.

In a country without oratories or sports clubs, students spend the whole day at school,

including Saturdays and Sundays. When the lessons are over, school classes and facilities are transformed into meeting places where pupils, with the assistance of teachers, are engaged in various afternoon activities, including sports clubs. However, despite this central role, almost all prefectures have responded positively to the Prime Minister's request. Indeed, children and young people are considered, according to experts, a risk factor for the spread of Covid-19 as they were often found to be asymptomatic carriers of the virus. For this reason, not without controversies, *some prefectures have prohibited access to public libraries, gyms and other facilities open to the public and also frequented by the elderly*. Alongside these initiatives aimed at discouraging children and young people from going out, local authorities and the central government are also introducing forms of both financial and organisational support to enable families to remain close to their children. Two of the most important measures adopted by the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare Katsunobu Kato follow this line of action. The first has extended until 30 May 2020 the deadline for applying for funding for SMEs that intend to make investments aimed at setting up telework, while the second

introduced a fund to support companies that improve the organization of work by encouraging employees to take remunerated extraordinary leave. With these interventions the government intends to stem the risk of infection in workplaces and prevent crowds on public transport while offering workers the opportunity to look after their children during this long and extraordinary period of forced holidays. In this context and with the same objectives, the Central Government of Tokyo, whose urban area has a population of about 35 million inhabitants and whose transport system is mainly on rail, has its *10 thousand employees teleworking on a quarterly basis*. On March 5, Yuichi Matsumoto, from the Olympic Games Department, after coordinating a videoconference meeting of nine people in charge of the organization of the Olympic and Paralympic Games scheduled to be held in Tokyo this summer, said he intends to promote the experience of this working method in companies in Tokyo that the city's administrative bodies are successfully experimenting and that, once the coronavirus emergency has passed, it could remain useful to decongest the city during the Olympic Games .

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