Japan expands COVID-19 curbs as surges strain hospitals

TOKYO: Japan decided on Thursday to expand its COVID-19 emergency curbs to cover more than 70% of the population, as a record surge in cases strained hospitals in the Olympics host city Tokyo and other parts of the country.

Japan had avoided the explosive outbreaks seen elsewhere. But infections are rising fast as new cases hit record highs in Tokyo, overshadowing the July 23-Aug. 8 Olympics and fuelling doubts over Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's pandemic response.

Suga announced the new steps - which are mostly voluntary, unlike strict lockdowns overseas - as new daily cases in Tokyo hit a record 5,042. Nationwide new cases topped 15,000 for the first time, while medical advisors to the capital said the Tokyo figure could double in two weeks, NHK public TV reported.

"The situation on the ground (at hospitals) is extremely severe," Economy Minister Yasutoshi Nishimura told a panel of experts before Suga's formal announcement. He said serious cases had doubled in the past two weeks.

The panel signed off on the proposal to declare "quasi-emergencies" in eight more of Japan's 47 prefectures. But Nishimura told a news conference some members had said the situation was severe enough to require a nationwide emergency.

Suga told reporters the government was "not considering that now" and would focus on hotspot areas.

Six prefectures including Tokyo are already under the third states of emergency to last through Aug. 31 and another five are under less strict directives, meaning just over half the population is covered by some restrictions.

Both types of curbs have recently focused on asking restaurants to close early and stop serving alcohol while urging people to stay at home as much as possible. Suga on Thursday also asked people to refrain from travel during summer holidays.

The latest steps, to take effect from Sunday, mean that more than 70% of the population will be under some form of restriction. Criticism of Suga, his ratings already at record lows, is growing over his handling of the pandemic.

The government says the Olympics has not caused the latest surge but experts say holding the Games now has sent a mixed message to an already weary public about the need to stay at home.

Games organisers on Thursday reported 31 new Games-related COVID-19 cases, bringing the total since July 1 to 353.

It remains to be seen whether the latest COVID-19 restrictions, which are mostly voluntary, will have much impact as the highly transmissible Delta variant spreads.

"I do not think that more (quasi-emergency steps) will make much difference - (it's) simply a political statement," said Kenji Shibuya, former director of the Institute for Population Health at King's College London.

The latest expansion follows a backlash against Suga's plan to limit hospitalisation of COVID-19 patients to those who are seriously ill and those at risk of becoming so. Others are told to isolate at home.

The shift is intended to address a hospital bed crunch, but crities say it will lead to an increase in deaths since the condition of patients can worsen rapidly.

In response to criticism from within and outside his ruling coalition, Suga said on Wednesday the change was aimed at regions suffering a surge in COVID-19 cases, such as Tokyo, and was not nationally uniform.

On Thursday, he appeared to back-pedal further, saying moderately ill patients in need of oxygen treatment would be admitted to hospital and doctors would make final decisions.

The backlash is another blow to Suga before a ruling party leadership race and parliamentary election this year.

Just under 31% of residents of Japan are fully vaccinated. With 15,221 deaths recorded as of Wednesday, the COVID-19 mortality rate was about 1.6%, in line with the United States.

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China's export slowdown in July may signal more bumps ahead

BEIJING: China's export growth unexpectedly slowed in July following outbreaks of COVID-19 cases, while imports also lost momentum, pointing to a slowdown in the country's industrial sector in the second half even as easing global lockdowns boost commerce.

The world's biggest exporter has staged an impressive economic rebound from a coronavirus-induced slump in the first few months of last year after quickly containing the pandemic, and its rapid vaccination rollout has helped drive confidence.

But new infections in July, mainly caused by the highly transmissible Delta strain have spread to tens of Chinese cities, prompting local authorities to lock down affected communities, order millions to be tested and temporarily suspend operations of some businesses, including factories.

Seasonal floods and bad weather last month also affected industrial production in some areas such as central China. read more

Exports in July rose 19.3% from a year earlier, compared with a 32.2% gain in June. Analysts polled by Reuters had forecast a gain of 20.8%.

"The pandemic worsened in other Asian developing countries, which may have led to a relocation of trade toward China. But leading indicators suggest exports may weaken in coming months," said Zhiwei Zhang, chief economist at Pinpoint Asset Management.

Outbreaks of COVID-19 cases in eastern and southern Chinese provinces, the country's main export hubs, had crimped factory output.

Aside from the drag from efforts to counter the spread of the Delta variant, Chinese exporters also struggled with an ongoing global semiconductor shortage, logistics bottlenecks, and higher raw material and freight costs.

"Although orders are recovering, there are too many uncertainties in the second half of the year, like how the domestic epidemic develops and the cost of raw materials. And at the same time, foreign production capacity is slowly picking up," said an exports sales manager based in Suzhou surnamed Ye.

Imports in July rose a slower 28.1% from a year earlier, lagging a 33% increase forecast in the Reuters poll, and 36.7% growth the previous month. Demand has dropped in recent months for iron ore, a key ingredient in steelmaking.

China's crude oil imports, however, rebounded in July from a six-month low as state-backed refiners ramped up output after returning from maintenance.

China's factory activity expanded at a slower pace in July due to higher raw material costs, equipment maintenance and extreme weather.

The slower Chinese shipments also reflected the moderation in U.S. business in July amid supply constraints, suggesting a cooling in the world's biggest economy after what was expected to have been a robust second quarter. read more

China posted a trade surplus of $56.58 billion in July, compared with the poll's forecast for a $51.54 billion surplus and $51.53 billion surplus in June.

Its trade surplus with the United States rose to $35.4 billion, Reuters calculations based on customs data showed, up from $32.58 billion in June.

The economy is on track to grow more than 8% this year but analysts say pent-up coronavirus demand has peaked and forecast that growth rates are starting to moderate.

Reuters

The PA was always meant to 'kill' the Palestinian cause

Outspoken Palestinian Authority (PA) critic Nizar Banat's June 24 death at the hands of the PA's security forces sparked weeks of protests and international criticism. This came on the heels of unprecedented protests against the seizure of Palestinian homes by Israeli settlers in East Jerusalem and a brutal Israeli war on Gaza.

Palestinians who protested over the death of Banat consider PA President Mahmoud Abbas to be complicit in the actions of the Israeli occupation and call for the fall of his government.

In a recent interview with The Media Line, the PA's Civil Affairs Minister Hussein al-Sheikh apologised to the family of Banat, on behalf of President Abbas. He further explained, "Maybe a mistake occurred during the action of law enforcement. Even if he [Banat] was demanded by law or wanted to appear for justice, there is nothing to justify the matter whatsoever." However, in the face of continued criticism, the PA also cancelled Article 22 of the "Code of Conduct" for civil servants that guarantees "freedom of expression".

The Mahmoud Abbas-led PA has a long and well-documented track record of brutally suppressing opposition activists. But the crisis of legitimacy the PA is currently facing is not just a result of Abbas's authoritarianism.

This crisis is as much an enduring legacy of the Oslo Accords that established the PA, not as a vehicle of the Palestinian national movement, but as an institutional mechanism purpose-built to circumscribe any form of Palestinian activism that aims to confront the Israeli occupation. Palestinian protesters are increasingly challenging that structure, and the two-state solution for which it ostensibly strives.

That the PA would be unconcerned with the Palestinian national movement was already apparent in the "letters of mutual recognition" exchanged by Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman and Fatah leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on September 9, 1993.

In his letter, Arafat recognised Israel's right to "exist in peace and security", declared that the PLO would renounce violence and took responsibility for preventing violent attacks on Israel and disciplining violators of the agreement.

In his response, Rabin did not recognise the Palestinian demand for statehood or sovereignty. Instead, he only accepted the PLO as the "representative of the Palestinian people" and agreed to begin negotiations.

The Oslo Accords then established the PA and the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) as an interim mechanism for self-governance. But the Oslo process did little to facilitate the arrival of the sovereign Palestinian state, as the confiscation of land, the expansion of the settlement movement and subsequent fragmentation of the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) continued through the course of the interim period. And since the failure of the Camp David Summit that was followed by the Second Intifada in 2000, Israel has only further consolidated its military control over the oPt.

With an intransigent Israeli occupation in place, the PA's governance mandate today is largely limited to the stipulation of Article 8 of the Oslo Accords that states that the PA must maintain "public order and internal security" through "a strong police force". This has resulted in the PA's security forces being allocated the largest share of the national budget. The security sector also employs almost half of the public sector personnel.

This infrastructure has then been used to furbish a robust security cooperation with Israel. The PA's security forces routinely hinder and suppress Palestinian activism that targets the Israeli military presence and settlements in the West Bank. The PA also engages in intelligence sharing with Israeli authorities, and it pre-emptively thwarts planned Palestinian attacks in areas and situations where the Israeli military is unable to operate.

There is also a "revolving door arrest policy" and Palestinians are arrested by the Israeli military immediately after their release from PA prisons, or vice versa. This two-tier system of arrest and detention that often involves prisoners being tortured in custody, is meant to deter Palestinian resistance activities against Israel.

Reflecting on the oddity of this cooperation, an activist said to me: "It's just frustrating .... We are fighting the Israelis, but the PA and Fatah work with them and help them. Ironically, my activism is against Israel, but I have gotten beaten up more times by the PA."

Behind the conduct of the PA is also a generation of Fatah functionaries who shed their revolutionary garb through the course of the Oslo process.

Arafat's renunciation of violence in 1993 was the most remarkable departure from the revolutionary ethos of the Palestinian national struggle. In 1974, Arafat appeared in the United Nations as the iconic symbol of the Palestinian liberation struggle and declared that he came bearing both "an olive branch and a freedom fighter's gun". He then implored the international community to "not let the olive branch fall from my hand". Yet less than two decades later, he had effectively criminalised the Palestinian armed struggle.

His transformation inspired others, like a close associate and staunch Fatah member who I interviewed in 2012. Speaking of the rival Islamist faction Hamas's military wing and its response to Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense in Gaza, he said, "Look, I was very close with Arafat. I was trained to become a fighter. I was with Arafat in Lebanon fighting the Israelis during the civil war. I saw how he was suffering. Israelis were searching for him, house by house. He would sleep in one house for 20 minutes, and then we would transport him to the next house. But we fought because we were fighting for respect."

However, he wasn't supportive of Hamas's military operations. Instead, he explained, "things have changed now. With Oslo, our leader told us that it was time that the Palestinian fighter took off the fatigues and put on a suit. I took off my military uniform and worked to build my country. I became a police officer and worked for a long time, training Palestinian Authority policemen."

The perception that "things have changed" was also evident in my conversations with Fatah leaders in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip in 2013. One such prominent Fatah member, sitting in the living room of his home in the iconic Jabalia refugee camp, said, "Look at the news. These people [Hamas] can't run the government. All they do is talk about muqawama [resistance]. Look at the state of Gaza because of this."

Of course, Abbas personifies the completion of this transformation of the Palestinian revolutionary. Arafat was often seen covering his entire head with the Palestinian keffiyeh, an iconic symbol of the Palestinian national struggle and the militant claim to Palestinian lands in their entirety. In comparison, his successor has little by way of military credentials. At times, Abbas ceremonially dons the keffiyeh around his neck and speaks the language of nationalism. But he rarely confronts the occupation. Instead, he maintains a security cooperation with Israel and is mostly concerned with keeping up an institutional remnant of the Oslo Accords – this, despite the Oslo process failing to secure Palestinian statehood.

In the end, Abbas and the PA have been able to sustain their "brand" of governance because international donors, who continue to fund public sector salaries, institution-building efforts, and security sector reform in the oPt, consider state building to be a means of peacebuilding.

The PA enjoys minimal civilian or military control in the oPt and is largely beholden to the whims of the Israeli military occupation. Yet, donors like the European Union – which contributed €85 million towards public sector salaries and pensions in 2020 – continue to provide the PA the financial wherewithal to act like a state as a way of disincentivising a military confrontation and ensuring Israel's security.

The result is that the ruling faction, Fatah, is able to posture as synonymous with official, legitimate politics. This is in part because having officially renounced the armed struggle against Israel, they are granted the political and material support of international stakeholders as amiable negotiating partners.

More significantly though, through the well-financed security arm of the PA, they have the means to police the Palestinian population and determine what counts as legitimate and sanctioned forms of political activism.

Donors like the United States – which has worked to strengthen the Abbas leadership against Hamas – argue that this mandate allows the PA to be guarantors of security, stability and peace. But as is evident in the response of the PA to the ongoing protests, it only gives a faction, facing unprecedented levels of opposition, the resources to suppress its critics under the pretext of maintaining law and order.

Aljazeera

Correction

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An American Green card by the name of Zakia faqiri son of Sultan Mohammad is missing and it is not valid.

AA4328

An American Green card by the name of Fatima faqiri son of Sultan Mohammad is missing and it is not valid.

n) and didn't know enough about colonial history. I learnt about the East India Company through the lens of a white Brit."