

British passenger of virus-hit Japan ship dies

28 February 2020

A British man who was on board a coronavirus-stricken cruise ship quarantined near Tokyo has died, Japan's health ministry said Friday.

The unidentified man's death is the latest linked to infections on the Diamond Princess [cruise ship](#), where more than 700 other people tested positive for the illness.

The ministry confirmed the man's nationality and death on Friday without giving further details. He is the first Briton to die from the illness and joins five Japanese nationals who also succumbed to the pathogen.

The death comes as the governor of Japan's rural northern island of Hokkaido urged people to stay at home this weekend in a desperate effort to contain the [coronavirus](#) outbreak.

Governor Naomichi Suzuki issued an unprecedented call in a televised meeting of government executives asking locals to "refrain from going out during the weekend" to prevent further spread of the virus.

The region has seen at least 63 cases, including two deaths, accounting for more than a quarter of all infections in Japan excluding those on the Diamond Princess.

Suzuki's plea came as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe defended his call for schools across the country to close, saying the coming weeks are "crucial" in containing infections.

Abe has also asked organisers to consider cancelling or postponing major gatherings, with a range of events from football matches to concerts already cancelled or rescheduled in recent days.

"We have to prevent emergence of a new cluster of patients among children," he told parliament.

"We made this decision because we regard it as our political responsibility."

The government cannot order schools to shut—a power that belongs to local education boards—and regional leaders voiced their surprise and mixed reactions at the abrupt announcement.

"This is shocking news," Chiba city mayor Toshihito Kumagai posted on Twitter, saying a blanket schools closure could put pressure on working parents including medical and emergency professionals.

But some experts have recommended closures, with a key member of a government panel saying earlier that smaller-scale school closures had helped contain a flu outbreak in 2009.

The steady spread of the virus in Japan has also fuelled speculation about whether Tokyo will be able to safely host the summer Olympics from July as planned.

The virus has so far infected at least 210 people across the country.

'Really angry'

Abe's call for school closures affects primary schools, high schools and junior high, but nurseries and after-school clubs that also cater to children during holidays will stay open, raising questions about the effectiveness of the policy.

"I'm really angry about this decision, which won't do anything to protect children," one mother of two told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"My company doesn't offer teleworking, so I'm going to have to take days off," added another mother. "Financially, it's very hard."

Others were more understanding, with Miho

Matsuno, a mother currently on [maternity leave](#), saying measures to contain the infection were needed.

"I think that we have to do the maximum possible, even if it seems excessive," she told AFP.

Disney closes parks

The operator of Tokyo's Disneyland and DisneySea said the two parks—which attract more than 30 million visitors a year—will be closed from Saturday until March 15.

Universal Studios Japan also said it would close the park for two weeks.

But a state visit by China President Xi Jinping planned this spring will still go ahead, Japan's foreign minister said.

He said the two countries were coordinating to ensure the "once-in-a-decade event" would be a success.

Japan's government has also fielded criticism over its handling of the quarantined cruise ship.

Hundreds of passengers who tested negative were allowed to depart the vessel after the 14-day quarantine on board, but several have since been diagnosed with the virus.

The Diamond Princess's operator confirmed all passengers have now left the ship, while crew are still disembarking to enter a new quarantine.

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