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Speeches and Statements by the Prime Minister

[COVID-19] Press Conference by the Prime Minister Regarding the Declaration of a State of Emergency

April 7, 2020

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Opening Statement

At first, I wish to express on behalf of the Japanese people our heartfelt appreciation to doctors, nurses, nursing assistants, and hospital staff, as well as to the public health center workers, experts, and medical technologists who have been working on counter-cluster efforts. I commend wholeheartedly the dedicated efforts being made with a strong sense of responsibility at this very moment in order to save the life of even one more person, right at the front lines of the fight against the novel coronavirus. In this harsh battle against the virus, more than 60,000 people have already lost their lives globally. The presence of medical workers armed with dependable techniques and a strong sense of mission encourages all of us. I thank you all sincerely.

We will take all possible courses of action to support you as you give your very best, unafraid of the severe situation fraught with the risk of infection. We will do everything we can to protect your workplaces at medical facilities. We are pushing forward with increasing the domestic production of medical supplies critically important in preventing infections. We will further strengthen the supply system through assistance from other industries, including electronics manufacturers. Patients with mild or no symptoms will recuperate at lodging facilities or similar places rather than at medical institutions, thereby reducing the burden on medical institutions. Through the cooperation of hotel chains, we have secured 10,000 rooms in the Kanto region and 3,000 rooms in the Kansai region. The Nippon Foundation is also pressing forward in constructing a temporary facility. We will use these rooms and this facility to be able to devote medical assistance to patients with severe symptoms, thereby maintaining hospital functions.

However, even with many such efforts underway, the number of patients is soaring, particularly in urban areas such as Tokyo and Osaka. The number of available beds for treatment is clearly approaching the limit. With the increasingly heavy burden on healthcare workers, both physically and mentally, medical sites are truly in a critical situation. In the current situation, we have not reached a state of a rapid and nationwide spread of the virus. However, in light of the fact that medical systems in some areas are being stretched, we have reached the conclusion that there is no more time to lose. We have determined that this situation could cause significant damage to people's daily lives and to the national economy.

Today, Dr. OMI Shigeru also joins us at this press conference. With the Advisory Committee's

endorsement, I declare a state of emergency, in accordance with article 32 of the Act on Special Measures. It will take effect in the four prefectures of Tokyo, Kanagawa, Chiba, and Saitama in Kanto, the prefectures of Osaka and Hyogo in Kansai, and the prefecture of Fukuoka in Kyushu. In Tokyo, which has the highest number of patients, the national government plans to refurbish facilities for the Olympic and Paralympic Games before the end of April, preparing facilities that can accept about 800 patients with mild symptoms. With this declaration of a state of emergency, if necessary, it will also be possible to mobilize at these facilities medical staff from the Self-Defense Forces and elsewhere and utilize these locations as provisional medical facilities pursuant to article 48 of the Act on Special Measures.

What is most important to reduce the burdens on medical care is not allowing the number of patients to increase. And, the most critical element in making that happen is citizens changing their behavior. While authority under the Act on Special Measures is exercised entirely by the governor of each prefecture, we believe the respective governors should call on the citizens of the four prefectures in Kanto, as well as the citizens of Osaka, Hyogo, and Fukuoka, based on clause 1 of article 45 of the Act on Special Measures, to refrain from going out frequently, except when necessary to maintain daily life. The situation is becoming increasingly urgent. The cumulative number of patients in Tokyo has surpassed 1,000. Recently, the number of patients has been increasing at a rate of doubling every five days. If the infection continues to spread at this pace, two weeks from now more than 10,000 people will be infected, and a month from now that number will top 80,000.

However, according to an estimate by the experts, if all of us make efforts and reduce opportunities for person-to-person contact by a minimum of 70 percent, or ideally 80 percent, we will cause the increase in the number of patients to reach its peak two weeks from now and shift over into a decrease. By doing so, we believe not only will we avoid an explosive increase in infections, but also the possibility of containment through counter cluster measures will emerge. I ask people to refrain from going out, aiming at a 70 to 80 percent decrease, for the limited period of one month between now and the end of Golden Week holidays on May 6. This includes time for us to assess its effectiveness.

As I mentioned earlier, freeing ourselves from this state of emergency a month from now is premised upon reducing person-to-person contact by 70 to 80 percent. This is no easy task. Until now we have been calling on the public to implement teleworking among other efforts. We ask you to work at home in principle, except for those jobs needed to sustain societal functions. Even in cases where going to the workplace cannot be avoided, I ask all businesses to implement measures such as reducing the number of workers present in the workplace by at least 70 percent through introducing rotating work schedules or other means; staggering work schedules; and maintaining sufficient distance between people. For the operation of restaurants and the like, I also ask owners to take measures such as thoroughly ventilating indoor spaces and ensuring that customers keep a distance from each other.

While schools will remain closed for a longer period, we will work in cooperation with local communities to accelerate the development of environments in which learning can be done online or through other means. We have lifted the ban on medical consultations by telephone or online, including for initial consultations. We will avoid the situation such that those who are afraid of the risk of infection at hospitals hold back from consulting with a doctor, by having them use such services. On that basis, I again ask people to firmly avoid the three Cs—closed spaces, crowded spaces, and close-contact settings—when going into public is unavoidable, such as going out to buy daily necessities.

As has been the case until now, there is no problem whatsoever with going outdoors to take a walk and go jogging. Meanwhile, please refrain from going to bars, nightclubs, karaoke parlors, and clubs with live music, where the three Cs overlap in a more concentrated way. I also ask people to avoid gatherings and events and to refrain from holding not only get-togethers for drinks but also dining with large numbers of people other than family members.

The frightening aspect of this infectious disease is that many people who have contracted it have no fever or other symptoms whatsoever, and it spreads by them infecting people around them without anyone realizing it. I would like everyone, in particular young people, to think that you yourself might be infected. Whenever you head out, we ask you to take such actions as avoiding crowded spaces, maintaining distance between yourself and others, and wearing a mask to avoid spraying droplets around. Such actions will protect the lives of other people, and by extension, they will also serve to protect your own life. I ask for everyone's cooperation in this regard.

Since we are introducing state of emergency measures, we cannot avoid causing enormous impacts on economic activities. Needless to say, a large number of micro-, small-, and medium-sized business operators have been facing significant difficulties in continuing businesses. It is no exaggeration to say that both the global economy and the Japanese economy are now truly facing the greatest crisis in the post-war period.

With that strong sense of urgency, we will protect employment and daily lives of citizens at all odds. Towards that end, we have decided to implement economic measures at a scale of 108 trillion yen, equivalent to 20 percent of our GDP, which is even one of the largest in the world. We will provide a total of over 6 trillion yen in cash payments to families and to micro-, small-, and medium-sized business operators now facing difficulties. In addition to 300,000 yen per household, we will provide an additional 10,000 yen per child when we disburse the next child allowance payment, providing firm support for the finance of families with many children.

The backbone sustaining the Japanese economy is micro-, small-, and medium-sized businesses. The business owners who are now gritting their teeth and making their best efforts now in the midst of this truly tough time present Japan's underlying strength. Your voices are reaching us. We must not allow your efforts to come to naught. It was through that belief that we established the very first cash payment to business owners in Japan's history. For businesses whose sales have dropped significantly, we will provide 2 million yen to small-, and medium-sized corporations as well as those relatively larger corporations and 1 million yen to individual owners. We will also reduce property taxes. We will also defer the payments of social security premiums for one year along with consumption tax and other tax payments. Of course, no penalties will be charged. By implementing deferments at a scale of 26 trillion yen, we will make it possible for those business operators to use those cash reserves for continuing their respective businesses. Interest free in real terms, unsecured, loans with principal repayment deferred for a maximum of five years will be also available from private-sector regional banks, shinkin banks, and credit unions as well. Moreover, we will raise the subsidy rate of the Employment Adjustment Subsidies to the highest level ever in history. We are determined to overcome this, the greatest crisis of the post-war period, together with the people by mobilizing all other conceivable policy instruments.

This declaration of a state of emergency does not in any way intend to close cities or a lockdown as we are seeing take place overseas. I state that clearly. Trains, buses, and other forms of public transportation will continue to operate. We will under no circumstances particularly block off roads, and in the view of the experts, there is no need whatsoever for such measures. Overseas, when cities were put under lockdown, there were some places where a large number of people slipped out of the cities, resulting in havoc and a spread of infection. Right now the greatest thing we should fear is fear itself. It is still fresh in your memory that false rumors spreading on social media resulted in a shortage of toilet papers in stores. I am just like all of you in feeling a deep sense of unease at the invisible enemy of virus. At such times, as social media is by nature a tool for deepening bonds between people and giving rise to solidarity in society, I believe that it has tremendous power to reduce societal unease. At the same time, it could also cause panic on the basis of misinformation driven and spread by nothing other than fear. In such cases, it causes enormous harm upon our economy, our society, and our lives that surpasses the risk of the virus itself.

In the view of the experts, even in the current situation, the infection risk in Tokyo or Osaka is not high at all, assuming citizens lead their normal lives while refraining from going out for non-essential, non-urgent reasons. The situation is entirely different from the cities overseas where lockdowns were imposed. Therefore, I ask the public to refrain strictly from taking actions such as moving to local areas outside these cities. There are many elderly people in these areas and they are said to have a high risk of developing cases that becomes severe. I ask you not to heighten their risk of becoming infected.

Needless to say, we will properly maintain societal functions. Through cooperation with local governments, services that support people's daily living, such as electricity, gas, telecommunications, finance, and garbage collection and incineration, will continue to operate as usual. I ask for the continued cooperation of those working at nursing care facilities for the elderly, day care centers, and other such places, for the sake of those in need of these services. Those engaged in the manufacture and processing of food products and other daily necessities, those involved in distribution, and those working in retail will continue operating dependably. Therefore, I wholeheartedly ask everyone to take level-headed actions based on accurate information.

Our lifestyles have changed completely over the past two months. Live music events we had been looking forward to have been canceled. Going out drinking with friends has been called off. We can't go to the places we want to. We can't get together with our friends. Our previous ways to spend a typical day have vanished. But through your actions like these, it is certain that many lives are being saved. I appreciate sincerely the cooperation of each and every citizen. Quite frankly, we cannot overcome this state of emergency through sole efforts by the national and local governments. This is an undeniable fact. Will we be able to avoid an explosion of infection cases? Will we succeed in bringing as many people as possible back from the brink of death? Will we be able to protect you and the family members you love? All of these depend on the actions you take. I ask for your cooperation once more.

Even in the midst of total uncertainty and great unease, hope is unmistakably emerging. The development of vaccine and therapeutic medicines are advancing, putting together wisdoms of companies and researchers across Japan and around the world. Avigan has been approved as a pharmaceutical treatment for novel influenza with side effects and other properties already identified. It has already been administered in more than 120 cases and we are receiving reports that it is effective in alleviating symptoms. We intend to expand to the greatest possible extent its administration to patients wishing to take it, within the framework of observational studies. To make that possible we will increase our stockpile of Avigan to three times the current level, enough to treat two million people. Companies all around Japan have indicated they will cooperate to produce the raw materials necessary to increase domestic production. Car manufacturers are helping to increase the production of ventilators. Airlines suffering from a series of canceled flights have offered to assist in sewing the gowns needed for medical facilities. People are working to deliver homemade masks to help children attending reopened schools. There are truck drivers working around the clock, even now, at this very moment, to keep physical distribution functioning properly in order to supply supermarkets with daily necessities. There are people who have launched crowdfunding efforts in the hope of providing any assistance they can to medical treatment facilities. The Nursing Association is now calling for cooperation from more than 50,000 nurses no longer working at medical facilities. I too wish to ask them for a helping hand. As we face this national crisis, I want to ask everyone for help in battling the virus.

In fact, responding to the call from the Nursing Association, some nurses have already offered to return to medical fields in order to protect and save lives. There are people standing up all around Japan in every business field, wanting to do whatever they can amidst this crisis. This is our hope.

Nine years ago, we experienced the Great East Japan Earthquake. A great many people lost their precious lives, wounded and lost loved ones. What brought hope to us in those heartbreaking and difficult days were the bonds of friendship between people and the spirit of helping one another that appeared from all around Japan. Now, we are once again facing great hardship. But if all of us join forces, we are able to move forward once again with hope. We can absolutely prevail in our battle with the virus and overcome this ordeal of emergency. I say this with great conviction.

I will end my statement here

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