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# Japan reports first COVID-19 death as more domestic cases logged

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A woman in her 80s infected with the new coronavirus died Thursday, becoming Japan's first confirmed fatality, health minister Katsunobu Kato said Thursday evening, as more cases of domestic infection were reported, in addition to hundreds on a quarantined cruise ship in Yokohama Bay.

The Japanese woman from Kanagawa Prefecture, just southwest of the capital, was found to be infected with the virus after she died, Kato said at a press conference.

The woman had been diagnosed with pneumonia and hospitalized since Feb. 1, the health ministry said, adding her breathing deteriorated on Feb. 6.

She was the mother-in-law of a Tokyo taxi driver who tested positive for COVID-19 on Thursday, according to a government official.

The driver, who is in his 70s, was quoted as saying that he had not transported foreign visitors in the two weeks before

he first showed symptoms on Jan. 29.

Meanwhile, in Wakayama Prefecture, a surgeon in his 50s became the first doctor in Japan to be infected with the virus, the local government said.

The latest cases also include a Japanese man in his 20s from Chiba Prefecture who tested positive on Thursday, bringing the total number of confirmed domestic infections to 33.

The government is wrestling with the spread of the pneumonia-causing virus. On Thursday, 44 additional infections were confirmed aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship docked at Yokohama with thousands of passengers and crew remaining confined to the quarantined vessel, taking the total of cases among passengers and crew to 218.

The gradual rise in the number of infected people with no apparent records of traveling to China or having contact with those from virus-hit Wuhan and its neighboring areas has raised a sense of vigilance.

The health minister struck a cautious note about the situation, saying more data are necessary “from an epidemiological standpoint to say infections are growing across the country.”

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said the government will spend a total of ¥15.3 billion (\$140 million) on such emergency measures such as developing rapid testing kits, as well as supplying 600 million masks a month.

Amid concern that a prolonged isolation on the cruise ship would worsen the health of people with pre-existing conditions, the government has decided to allow elderly passengers suffering from chronic illnesses to disembark earlier than scheduled if they test negative for the virus.

The roughly 200 passengers who are age 80 and over on the Diamond Princess may be allowed off the ship as early as Friday, depending on their wishes and health condition, Kato told reporters, adding those with pre-existing conditions have already undergone screening.

Those allowed off the ship will stay at a facility arranged by the government until the quarantine period ends next Wednesday. The more than 3,500 passengers and crew were originally scheduled to be confined aboard the ship through that day.

“There are some people whose health may deteriorate by staying (aboard) for an extended period,” said Kato, while indicating the ministry may lower the age for people allowed to disembark.

After a male passenger in his 80s was found to be infected with the virus after leaving the vessel in Hong Kong, the ministry has checked the health of all those still on the ship, testing those with symptoms and others who came in close contact with them.

The ministry has since requested that people stay in their cabins to prevent the virus from spreading after taking those infected as well as those who fell ill to hospitals.

Also on Thursday, the first group of Japanese nationals evacuated from Wuhan on a government-chartered aircraft was allowed to go home after a little over two weeks of isolation.

A total of 197 people had been quarantined at a hotel in Chiba Prefecture, near Tokyo, and government facilities since they returned on Jan. 29 from the Chinese city at the center of the outbreak.

They all tested negative in their final virus examination conducted Tuesday after completing a 12.5-day monitoring period for the virus.

The health ministry said 199 evacuees on the second chartered aircraft that arrived on Jan. 30 are also free to return home as their test results showed they were not infected.

The Tokyo government said it will make 50 temporary public housing units available free of charge for those who do not immediately have a place to stay.

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