

Part II The Japanese government's response to COVID-19

Chapter 2

Rescue of Japanese nationals from Wuhan and strengthening border measures

10:00 a.m., January 23, 2020 – In Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, traffic inside and outside the city was cut off, and many Japanese residents were left behind due to the sudden blockade of the city. The Japanese government proceeded with negotiations with the Chinese side to rescue the Japanese nationals, and on January 29, it succeeded in operating a charter aircraft for their repatriation from Wuhan ahead of other countries around the world. On the other hand, confusion was perceived regarding the implementation of tests for returnees and their isolation, revealing an inadequate system for accepting them.

Since January, the government also strengthened border measures in order to prevent an influx of COVID-19 into the country and the spread of domestic infections including entry restrictions, travel suspension recommendations, returnee checks and health observations, and visa restrictions.¹ This decision was made not only from the perspective of preventing an influx of infected cases, but also as a comprehensive policy decision that took into account various circumstances including economic impacts.

The repatriation operation from Wuhan to Japan and the subsequent strengthening of border measures were important as an initial response to COVID-19 in Japan, along with the response to the Diamond Princess situation observed in the previous chapter. In this chapter, we try to clarify the facts about how these measures were considered and what kind of adjustments were made.

1. Operation to repatriate Japanese nationals from Wuhan

1.1. From the outbreak of infection to the blockade of Wuhan (December 31-January 23)

On December 31, 2019, Wuhan City officials reported on multiple cases of pneumonia, mainly among people with connections to the city's seafood market. Then on January 9, 2020, the Chinese authorities announced that this pneumonia was due to the novel coronavirus.

On January 15, the first infection case was found in Japan. The government held a ministerial meeting on January 21, but the meeting did not touch on the protection of Japanese residents in Wuhan. But in fact, an instruction was provided to a limited number of officials at related departments of the Foreign Ministry around January 17 to

give initial consideration for the protection of Japanese nationals, on the forecast that such a step could become necessary.

In late January, things started to move rapidly. On January 22, the Chinese authorities announced that the number of infected people had reached hundreds and that human-to-human transmission of the virus had occurred. Just over a dozen hours later, before dawn on January 23, Wuhan officials suddenly announced that they would effectively blockade the city from 10 a.m. local time on the same day to prevent the spread of the infection. As a result, public transport such as subways and buses was suspended throughout the city, and highways, stations and airports were also blocked. At this point, there were about 700 Japanese people residing in Hubei Province, including Wuhan City, and many of them were left behind in Wuhan without any means of transport.

1.2. Background to Prime Minister Abe's remarks on charter aircraft (January 23-26)

1.2.1. Planning for the charter aircraft dispatch

Following the blockade of Wuhan, the Japanese government set up a response headquarters at its embassy in Beijing on January 23, and the embassy began confirming the status² of Japanese residents in Wuhan.

The news of the blockade of Wuhan was received with great surprise in Japan, and the government subsequently began a full-scale study into measures to protect the Japanese residents. In fact, at the relevant ministerial meeting held on the morning of January 24, Prime Minister Abe instructed that the safety of Japanese residents be ensured, and on the same day, the Foreign Ministry issued a “Level 3” risk of infectious diseases alert (avoid all travel)”³ throughout Hubei Province.⁴

At a news conference on the evening of January 24, Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi declined to mention the specific status of a plan to dispatch rescue aircraft to Wuhan. In reality, however, since the blockade of Wuhan City on the 23rd, an active exchange of information by Beijing's diplomatic corps had been carried out through the embassy in China, and by the following 24th, it was found that some countries including the United States were considering dispatching aircraft to Wuhan for the rescue of their own nationals. In addition, the Foreign Ministry was informed through the Wuhan office of the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) of growing requests from Japanese residents seeking rescue by the government and the state of confusion at local medical institutions. Based on this information, the Foreign Ministry was steadily moving ahead with considering the dispatch of charter aircraft to Wuhan, and Foreign Minister Motegi had officially instructed preparations for such a dispatch by noon on the 24th.⁵

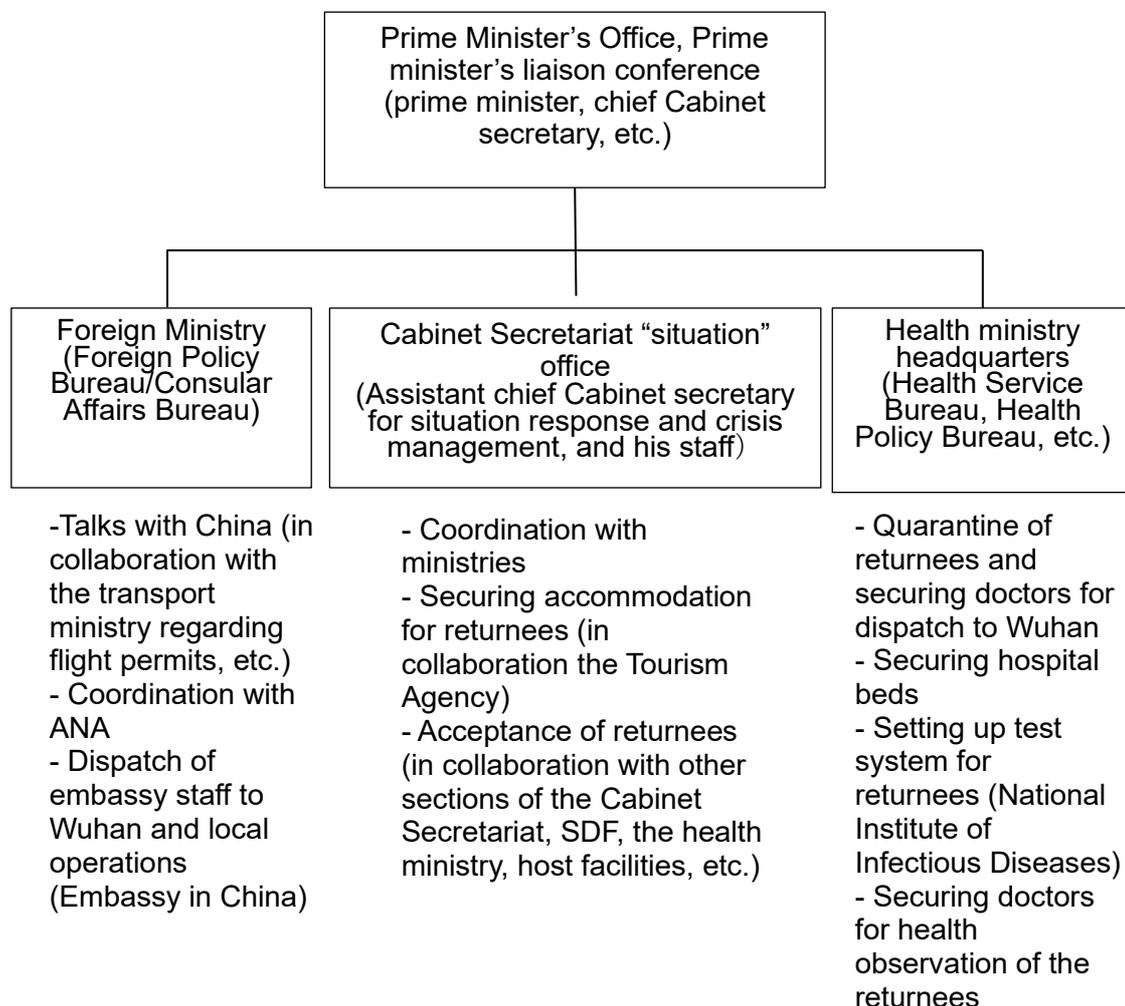
The status of such studies within the Foreign Ministry was reported to Prime

Minister Abe at a meeting held on the evening of January 24, and thereafter, a full-scale study was launched by the Prime Minister's Office on dispatching charter aircraft.

1.2.2. Coordination/negotiation for dispatch of charter aircraft

The study by the Foreign Ministry was mainly carried out by the Consular Affairs Bureau⁶ responsible for the protection of Japanese nationals and the Foreign Policy Bureau with a view to communicating information to the Cabinet Secretariat. After January 23, the Foreign Ministry began negotiations with All Nippon Airways, which operated regular flights to Wuhan, regarding charter aircraft operations, and made a formal flight request to the company around noon on the 25th. Also from the same day, following Prime Minister Abe's instruction to conduct high-level negotiations, senior officials in the Cabinet Secretariat began negotiations with Chinese Ambassador to Japan Kong Xuanyou. At the same time, the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry, primarily its Health Service Bureau, started preparations for accepting returnees, while the Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism was put in charge of obtaining flight permits and adjusting airport use and cooperated with ANA. From the perspective of information sharing and speedy decision-making, ANA staff members also participated in the meetings between ministries and agencies as necessary, and preparations were literally carried out in a public-private partnership.

Outline of the division of roles of the parties involved in considering the dispatch of chartered aircraft (January 26-29)



Since this operation was a project requiring a cross-sectional response across multiple ministries, the Cabinet Secretariat's "situation" office (the assistant chief Cabinet secretary for situation response and crisis management and his staff) was responsible for coordinating between ministries. The Foreign Ministry was mainly in charge of coordination with the Chinese side, negotiations with ANA and operations in Wuhan, and the health ministry was responsible for securing medical institutions and doctors for accepting the returnees and setting up a testing system.

On the evening of the Sunday of January 26, as the bureaucrats in Kasumigaseki were making such preparations, Abe headed from his private residence in Tomigaya to the prime minister's official residence. Immediately after his arrival, the prime minister held a meeting with senior officials from the Cabinet Secretariat, the Foreign Ministry and the health ministry to discuss the rescue of Japanese nationals from Wuhan. This was

the first meeting of an informal group, later called the prime minister's liaison conference. The conference was set up under the leadership of the office of the prime minister to make swift decisions as the situation changed from moment to moment. Thereafter, the conference dealt with the situation in China and the status of infections in Japan, with Chief Medical and Global Health Officer Yasuhiro Suzuki from the health ministry and Vice Foreign Minister Takeo Akiba starting to report directly to Prime Minister Abe and others. The conference, which was initially organized as needed, gradually came to be held every day as the threat of COVID-19 infection increased, functioning as a venue for the core members of the government including Prime Minister Abe to consider and make decisions.

Around 6 p.m. after the meeting, Prime Minister Abe talked to the media in front of the official residence.

“Since we now have a plan in place to fly charter aircraft, we have decided to pursue all means including chartered flights to repatriate all the people who wished to return once coordination with the Chinese government is completed,” he said.

The fact that the prime minister made the announcement to the media on a Sunday night in front of the official residence indicated the fevered nature of preparations and adjustments within the government at the time. It was in this way that the Japanese government officially announced the dispatch of charter aircraft to Wuhan just three days after the blockade.

1.3. Japan-China foreign minister telephone discussion (January 26)

Actually, at the time of the Prime Minister Abe's news conference on the evening of January 26, the Chinese side had not officially agreed to the dispatch of charter aircraft. Abe made the announcement without the consent of the partner country, but a senior Foreign Ministry official requested to Chinese Ambassador Kong that Beijing cooperate with the dispatch of charter aircraft in line with the prime minister's statement.

After that, from around 9 p.m. on the same day, Foreign Minister Motegi held a telephone discussion with Chinese Foreign Minister and State Councilor Wang Yi – becoming the first foreign minister of any country to discuss COVID-19 response with China. Motegi asked the Chinese side to “ensure the safety of Japanese nationals and support the return of all Japanese nationals who wish to return home,” successfully gaining Wang's understanding. Wang also stated that there was a shortage of medical supplies such as masks in Wuhan, so Motegi offered to provide relief supplies from Japan.

1.4. Local operations in Wuhan (January 25-29)

A major issue in the Wuhan operation was how to transport the Japanese nationals who wished to be repatriated to Japan to the airport. Public transportation in Wuhan had been suspended from January 23, and the traffic of general vehicles were

restricted. Under these circumstances, it was the connection between the JETRO Wuhan office and local companies that played a major role in securing transportation for Japanese residents. On the afternoon of January 25, the JETRO Wuhan office asked a Chinese businessman with whom it had a close relationship to cooperate with the repatriation of the Japanese nationals. With the cooperation of this man, who was also a local council member in Wuhan and had good connections with the local authorities, the Japanese Embassy in China managed to secure a large bus and a passage permit.⁷

The Wuhan operation was also supported by the efforts of diplomats, who entered Wuhan without regard for the danger and responded around the clock, as well as the conscientious cooperation of the private sector. The Wuhan dispatch team led by Envoy Atsushi Ueno (a total of 10 people consisting of Ueno and volunteers) departed the embassy in Beijing on the afternoon of January 26, and arrived in Wuhan 17 hours later on the morning of the 27th, having traveled 1,200 kilometers overland. Based on information compiled by the JETRO Wuhan office and the Japanese chamber of commerce and industry covering the areas of residence of Japanese nationals, the team proceeded to identify those who wished to be repatriated and considered routes to the airport.⁸ In addition, the ANA Wuhan branch kept up a running report on these local developments to its head office, and made efforts to ensure that the Japanese side's considerations were always based on the latest and most accurate information. In addition, the embassy in Beijing continued to negotiate with Chinese diplomatic authorities and individually contact the Japanese residents.⁹

1.5. Charter plane dispatch and acceptance of returnees (from January 26)

1.5.1. Policy of 100% testing and quarantine

On the Japanese side, the Cabinet Secretariat and the health ministry were taking the lead in looking into and preparing for the acceptance of returnees at a rapid pace. On January 28, the health ministry established its headquarters for the COVID-19 response headed by health minister Kato, and with the cooperation of doctors belonging to Japan DMAT (Disaster medical assistance team), they proceeded to secure hospitalization destinations for returnees amid the reluctance on the part of many medical institutions to accept patients with an unknown infectious disease.

As a general rule, all returnees from Wuhan would undergo health observation for two weeks in private hotels or public facilities, but in fact, this policy was not finalized until just before the charter flight was operated. In fact, health minister Kato told the Lower House Budget Committee on the afternoon of January 28 that asymptomatic returnees would be monitored with regular body temperature measurements and checkup on their conditions at home, indicating that even at this point, the policy of isolating all returnees at accommodation facilities was not completely in place.¹⁰ The health ministry's position at the time was that asymptomatic people would not infect others, so there was no particular need for uniform isolation of people with no symptoms.

However, the Prime Minister's Office urged the health ministry to isolate all returnees for a certain period of time, and eventually this policy was adopted. At the time, there was growing public concern about the possible spread of infection in Japan by way of returnees from Wuhan, and it was decided that the government needed to take such measures to alleviate public anxiety by putting technical discussion aside. In response to this policy, the Cabinet Secretariat's situation office cooperated with the Japan Tourism Agency to search for host facilities, and on the night of January 28, it was finally decided that Katsuura Hotel Mikazuki, in Katsuura, Chiba Prefecture, would accept the returnees.¹¹

Looking back, one of the medical technical officers of the health ministry involved in the response noted that such a policy was not necessarily scientifically rational in light of the knowledge and information about the disease at the time, but that the layman's judgment by the Prime Minister's Office turned out to be effective in preventing the spread of infections – given that it was later found that there were asymptomatic carriers of the novel coronavirus and that they can infect people even without developing any symptom themselves.¹²

1.5.2. Dispatch of the first flight

On the night of January 28, a charter aircraft operated by ANA departed from Haneda Airport. Initially, the aircraft was scheduled to take off on the morning of the 28th, but just prior to that, a request to cancel was received from the Chinese side, and it finally departed at night. For ANA, which only had a limited time to prepare, the burden of securing alternative personnel and adjusting schedules due to the sudden change in timing was extremely arduous, but ANA overcame this through a company-wide emergency response.

The charter plane subsequently arrived at Wuhan Airport at 0:29 a.m. on the 29th. This was the earliest timing, along with the United States, of all the countries around the world that dispatched rescue aircraft to Wuhan. The aircraft was also equipped with relief supplies such as masks and protective clothing, which was handed over to the Chinese side at Wuhan Airport. The provision of relief supplies from Japan ahead of the rest of the world was received very favorably in China.¹³

Foreign Ministry officials say that the basis of this operation were the good Sino-Japanese relations over the past few years.¹⁴ At the time, nearly 30 countries were working to operate charter aircraft to Wuhan, but Japan was the only country that was able to fly charter planes for three consecutive days from January 29.

Apart from Foreign Ministry staff engaged in the on-site task of accepting the returnees, this first flight also carried a doctor, two nurses, and a quarantine officer for in-flight quarantine. The doctors who boarded the charter plane, including the second and subsequent flights, were all doctors who had completed the Infectious Disease Emergency Specialist (IDES) training program at the health ministry.^{15,16} Under the guidance of these

doctors, seating arrangements for symptomatic and asymptomatic persons were divided on board, and health checks were conducted for the returnees. In addition, not only doctors but also flight attendants wore protective clothing and took thorough measures against infection, such as not providing in-flight meals and beverages.¹⁷

1.5.3. Accepting returnees on the first flight

The first flight with Japanese passengers from Wuhan arrived safely at Haneda Airport at around 8:40 a.m. on January 29.¹⁸ The aircraft was parked at a “satellite” facility located away from the main body of the arrival terminal, from which the returnees were transported by large buses and ambulances that were waiting. A total of 206 Japanese were repatriated on the aircraft, and five of them were found infected with the novel coronavirus in subsequent tests.

On the first flight, there was a problem in that two returnees refused to undergo tests and health observation at the arranged accommodation and returned to their homes.¹⁹ Regarding this point, one of the medical technical officers at the health ministry said that how to respond when a returnee refused a test or health observation, or the acquisition of prior consent, was not fully considered in advance, since it had not been decided to perform PCR tests on all returnees and to isolate them in accommodation facilities until just before the charter flight, so there was almost no time to prepare.²⁰

The returnees on the first flight who agreed to the health observation at the accommodation facility were transferred to Katsuura Hotel Mikazuki, and after January 29, they underwent a two-week health observation at the hotel. There were not enough rooms at the hotel for the number of returnees, and several returnees had to share a room, which incurred public criticism pointing out the problem in terms of infection control.

The returnees who subsequently completed the two-week health observation period and were confirmed to have no positive reaction in the second PCR test then returned home.

1.5.4. Dispatch of second to fifth flights and acceptance of returnees

The government subsequently dispatched a total of five repatriation charter flights for Japanese residents in Wuhan as follows.

List of repatriation charter flights dispatched to Wuhan

Flight	Flight dates	Number of returnees	Number of infected ²¹
No.1	Jan. 28-29	206	5
No.2	Jan. 29-30	210	4
No.3	Jan. 30-31	149	3
No.4	Feb. 6-7	198	1
No.5	Feb. 16-17	65	1
Total		828	14

For those who returned to Japan after the second flight, a two-week health observation was conducted not at a private hotel but at the National Tax Agency's National Tax College and other public facilities.²²

In accepting these returnees, much criticism and dissatisfaction was voiced against the government officials by the returnees who had to be quarantined for two weeks amid the fear of infection. In these circumstances, a male staff member of the Cabinet Secretariat situation office in his thirties, who was in charge of accepting the returnees, was found dead on the premises of the National Institute of Public Health, where the returnees were staying, on February 1. The staff member, who was staying at the facility to help the returnees, was believed to have jumped from the dormitory to commit suicide, and although the causal relationship with the death was not clear, it was pointed out that he may have suffered from the stress of his work accepting the returnees. One of the medical technical officers involved in similar work at the health ministry at the time said that every ministry was working with a skeleton staff due to the risk of infection, and that because the staff in charge were hardly being rotated out, the work burden tended to concentrate on a small number of people.²³ In fact, at this time, the situation office was given an excessive workload, and had asked the Cabinet Secretariat's office for pandemic influenza and new infectious diseases to take over some of its duties.

In this way, the government succeeded in operating chartered flights ahead of the rest of the world to repatriate Japanese nationals from Wuhan through quick top-down decision-making, an all-government response, and public-private partnership. But since the time to prepare for the operation was so short, various issues remained concerning the acceptance of returnees.

2. Strengthening border measures

2.1. Outbreak of infections in Japan and initial response (in January)

2.1.1. Calling attention as an initial response

The initial response of the Japanese government to COVID-19 was relatively quick compared to other countries. On January 5, 2020, the health ministry posted information on the infectious disease on the quarantine station website, and on the following day, the status of pneumonia cases and the ministry's response to this were posted on the website.

On the same day, the health ministry called on medical institutions to actively utilize tests at the National Institute of Infectious Diseases based on suspected cases surveillance²⁴ for patients with pneumonia of unknown cause who had stayed in Wuhan and issued a clerical notification. The ministry subsequently posted posters calling for self-reporting to people entering Japan from Wuhan at airports, etc., and continued to disseminate information about the infectious disease.

However, regarding the impression he had at the time, health minister Kato said, "The response was based on the existing system, and I didn't think at that time that the situation would go so far. Especially because Japan had no experience of SARS or MERS, it was hard to imagine."²⁵

2.1.2. First domestic case and Chinese New Year

On January 6, when the health ministry issued the above administrative notification, a man who had returned from Wuhan visited a medical institution in Kanagawa Prefecture. The man, who was hospitalized from January 10 due to worsening pneumonia, was tested at the National Institute of Infectious Diseases based on suspected cases surveillance on January 14, and turned out to be infected with COVID-19 on the night of the following day. This was the first confirmed case in Japan.

With the confirmation of a domestic case of infection, the government's response gradually took on greater urgency. On January 16, the day after the infection was confirmed, an information liaison office for COVID-19 was set up in the Prime Minister's Office, and at the relevant ministerial meeting on January 21, Prime Minister Abe instructed thorough border measures. Since January 20, the health ministry had requested airlines to tell travelers from Wuhan to self-report their conditions through in-flight announcements, and strengthened information dissemination via its official Twitter account and other means. The Foreign Ministry also issued a Level 1 infectious disease

risk alert (exercise caution) for throughout China on the 21st.

Around this time, Chinese tourists coming to Japan during the Chinese New Year began to trigger concerns about the spread of infection in this country. However, at this point, the government did not take any strong measures such as refusing entry from China. In this regard, Foreign Ministry officials said that restricting entry from China before the Chinese New Year and angering Beijing could have made it difficult to obtain the Chinese government's cooperation in protecting Japanese in China.²⁶ As mentioned in Section 1.1., the Foreign Ministry had already begun initial studies on protecting Japanese residents in Wuhan, and the government was forced to steer a difficult course between strengthening border measures and protecting Japanese residents.

2.2. Background to the decision to refuse entry from Hubei Province (January 31)

2.2.1. Establishment of the government's response headquarters and designation of COVID-19 as designated infectious disease

On January 23, a de facto city blockade was suddenly enforced in Wuhan. The government would subsequently begin a full-scale response to the novel coronavirus, and along with this, measures at the border were gradually strengthened. On the same day, the health ministry requested airlines to distribute health cards on board all flights from China,²⁷ and on the following day, the Foreign Ministry announced a Level 3 infectious disease risk alert (ceasing of travel recommended) for Hubei Province including Wuhan.²⁸ At the relevant ministerial meeting on the same day, Prime Minister Abe instructed more thorough measures be taken at the border.

In addition, on January 28, the Cabinet adopted ordinances specifying COVID-19 as a designated infectious disease²⁹ under the Infectious Diseases Control Law and as a quarantinable infectious disease³⁰ under the Quarantine Act. As a result, it became possible to have compulsory hospitalization of novel coronavirus disease patients under the Infectious Diseases Control Act, medical examinations, testing and disinfection measures for the disease under the Quarantine Act.³¹

From around this time, the number of infected people began to increase gradually in Japan as well. On January 28, an infection was discovered in a person who had never traveled to Wuhan, and human-to-human transmission was confirmed for the first time in Japan. In the case of returnees from Wuhan who arrived at Haneda by charter flight on January 29, five people, including asymptomatic carriers, were eventually confirmed as being infected. This led the government to recognize the existence of asymptomatic persons infected with the novel coronavirus.

On January 30, the government, which took the situation seriously, decided to establish the COVID-19 response headquarters. At its first meeting held on the same day,

Prime Minister Abe indicated a sense of crisis that border measures thus far taken must be raised to a higher level given the occurrence of asymptomatic infection cases. Therefore, the Foreign Ministry issued a Level 2 infectious disease risk alert (Please cease unnecessary and non-urgent travel) throughout China, and the government decided to move forward the enforcement of government ordinances specifying COVID-19 as a designated infectious disease under the Infectious Diseases Control Law and as a quarantinable infectious disease under the Quarantine Act.³²

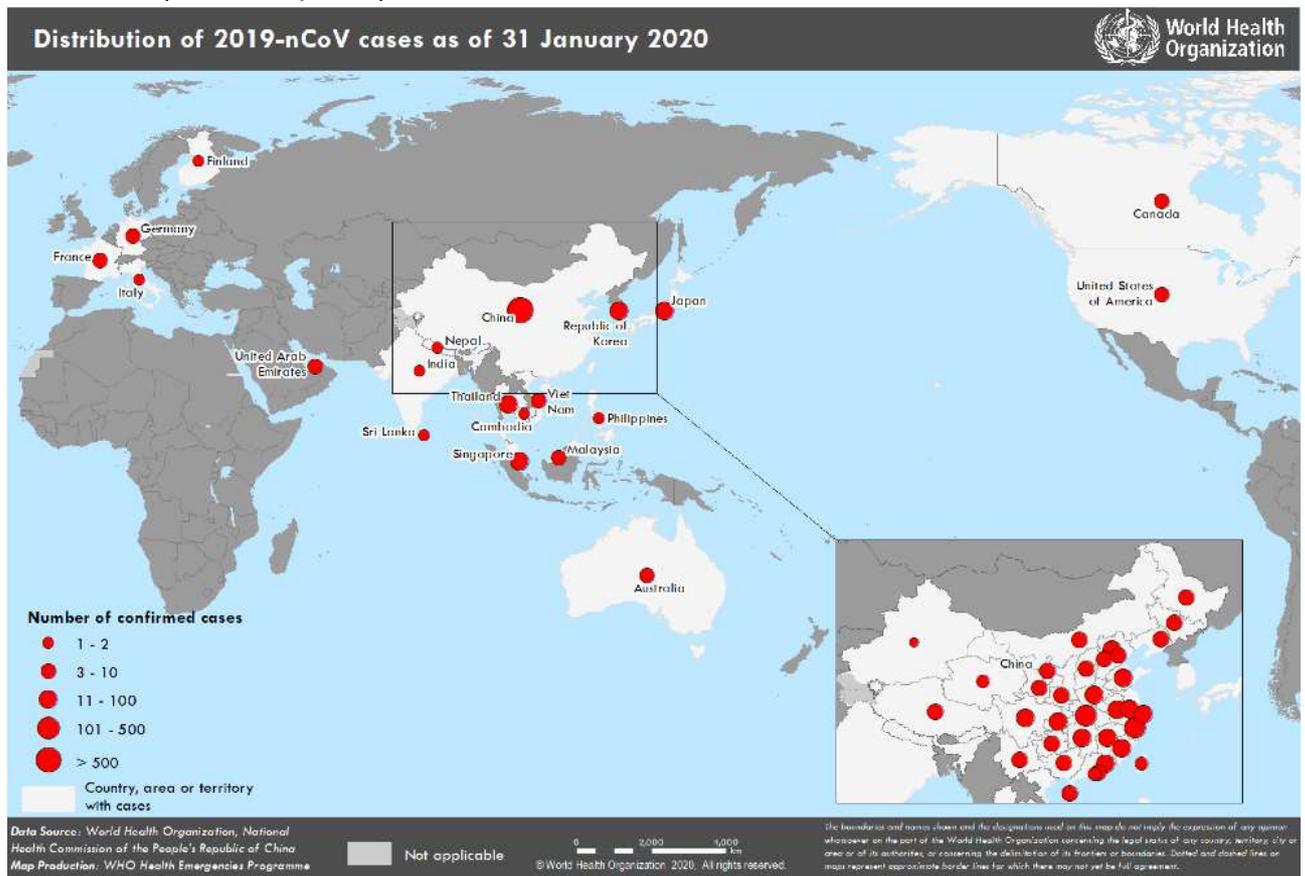
2.2.2. A last resort: Item 14, Article 5 of the immigration control law

At the Lower House Budget Committee on January 31, Prime Minister Abe stated that infected persons would be refused landing due to the enforcement of the ordinances, and made clear that the government would consider tightening immigration control of people who could not be confirmed as infected.

However, the immigration control law does not have a clear provision that travelers from endemic areas can be denied landing,³³ and there was no precedent for such an operation. Initial studies led by Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Kazuhiro Sugita and the National Security Secretariat also pointed to the need for a new legislation. Justice Minister Masako Mori subsequently indicated that Item 14, Clause 1, Article 5, of the immigration control law could be applied, and the Justice Ministry took the lead in examining this. Initially, the ministry was cautious about the application of this clause. But even though she said that an “extremely careful judgment is required” for the use of the provision of the immigration control law since it is deemed a “last resort” provision, Mori eventually decided to apply the clause in an emergency situation to protect the lives and health of the people.³⁴

Ultimately, the government decided, at an emergency ministers' meeting of the National Security Council, to refuse landing by travelers from China's Hubei Province, by interpreting those traveling from the province – a COVID-19 endemic area – as people who the government has a good reason to determine “may act to harm the interests or public safety of Japan” as stipulated in Item 14, Clause 1, Article 5 of the immigration control law. Following a Cabinet approval, the government began on February 1 to refuse landing, on the basis of that provision, by foreign travelers who had stayed in Hubei Province within the past 14 days. On this point, a senior official in the Cabinet Secretariat said that in order to provide some backup for the justice minister's decision to use the provision to refuse landing, the first ever emergency meeting of the National Security Council was held,³⁵ and after adequate consultation with the Cabinet Legislation Bureau, the decision in question was made.

Countries and regions where infected persons were confirmed as of January 31, 2020 (WHO Report³⁷)



2.2.3. Strengthening of border measures and Xi Jinping's state visit to Japan

In reality, however, the infection situation was rapidly deteriorating around this time not only in Hubei Province but throughout China,³⁶ and the infection was spreading especially in Zhejiang Province, Guangdong Province, Shandong Province, and so on.

On January 30, the World Health Organization declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) for COVID-19, and the United States issued a Cancel Travel/Recommend Evacuation alert for all of China. The following day, the U.S. government announced that it would ban foreigners who had recently traveled to China and travelers from China from entering the U.S. after February 2. Countries such as Australia, Singapore, New Zealand and Vietnam similarly began restricting entry from throughout China as of early February. At the end of January, there were also growing opinions from within the Liberal Democratic Party that border measures for the whole of China should be urgently strengthened.

However, Japan did not immediately follow these policies of other countries. Why didn't the government implement landing denials for all of China as of early

February? Regarding this point, a staff member of the Prime Minister's Office revealed that it was difficult for Japan to take such steps as some people argued that Japan should take a less hardline position toward China than U.S. President Donald Trump since it was just before the planned state visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping, and also because European countries had not yet embarked on denying entry from China.³⁸ On the other hand, a senior Foreign Ministry official said that border measures and Xi's visit were considered independently, noting, "It wasn't viable to make a decision to sacrifice the health of the people because we had to realize (Xi's) state visit."³⁹

Xi's planned state visit was the result of a direct invitation by Prime Minister Abe to the Chinese president confirmed during their meeting at the June 2019 summit to "strengthen high level dialogue and visits, including state leaders, between eternal neighbors in order to conduct close and constant communication." This was to be the first visit of a Chinese president to Japan as a state guest since 2008, and thus would be an extremely important meeting for Abe's administration amid various pending bilateral issues such as the repeated incursion of Chinese public vessels into waters around the Senkaku Islands. According to Foreign Ministry officials, Prime Minister Abe was looking for ways to pull the visit off right up until the announcement to postpone it.^{40,41}

In addition, landing refusal for all of China was a problem that needed to be considered beyond diplomatic relations. Cabinet Secretariat officials said that landing refusals for China would have too great an economic impact and "could not be implemented lightly."⁴² In fact, about 30% (some 9.6 million) of foreigners who visited Japan in 2019 (about 31.9 million) were Chinese, and China continued to be Japan's largest trading partner for over 10 years since 2007.

Media reports suggested that President Xi's visit to Japan had a strong impact on the consideration of strengthening border measures. However, in a situation like this, it was, in fact, difficult to glibly implement landing refusal measures for the whole of China, which was a closely related "eternal neighbor." The scope and timing of immigration restrictions from China were determined after careful consideration within the government, taking into account complex circumstances such as diplomatic relations and economic ties between the two countries.

2.3. The run-up to the postponement of Xi's visit and the announcement of (de facto) entry restrictions for all of China and South Korea (March 5)

2.3.1. Landing refusal for travelers from Zhejiang Province, China, Daegu in South Korea, and so on

From the first half of February 2020, the government expanded the scope of measures such as landing refusal as the infections in other countries further expanded, in parallel with its response to the Diamond Princess. Consideration of strengthening these

border measures was carried out mainly by the National Security Secretariat (the economic group) in the Cabinet Secretariat.⁴³ On February 13, landing refusal measures were taken for non-Japanese travelers who had been in Zhejiang Province, China within the past 14 days.⁴⁴ On the same day, a government ordinance was also enacted to change the position of COVID-19 under the Quarantine Act, and from the following 14th, strong quarantine measures such as the isolation of patients and restricting the activity of potentially infected persons became possible.⁴⁵

Moreover, the infection was spreading in South Korea from mid-February. The number of infected people in South Korea, which was 28 as of February 13, has doubled day by day due to mass infections among members of a religious group, reaching 1,261 (including 12 dead) as of February 26. In light of these circumstances, the government decided on the same day to refuse landing for foreign travelers who had been in Daegu, South Korea within the past 14 days, implementing the measures on the following day.⁴⁶

The spread of the infection in China would not stop, and the number of infected people, which was slightly less than 10,000 at the end of January, reached 66,558 as of February 15, and in addition to Hubei and Zhejiang Provinces, on which Japan had implemented the landing refusal measures, the number of infected people exceeded 1,000 in Hunan, Henan and Guangdong.⁴⁷ However, the government did not implement landing refusals for Chinese provinces other than Hubei and Zhejiang until March 5.

According to a senior Foreign Ministry official, the government at this time received a strong request from major automakers and others to not refuse landing from Guangdong Province, where the plants of Japanese-affiliated manufacturers were concentrated, and the government was unable to dismiss this.⁴⁸ While the measures against the novel coronavirus were expected to cause great economic damage, this provides a glimpse of a situation in which the government could not ignore the wishes of major automakers that supported the nation's industries.

2.3.2. Xi's visit to Japan postponed and entry restrictions announced for China and South Korea

On March 5, the government announced that it would postpone the state visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping, which had been scheduled for April. Both Japan and China were busy dealing domestically with the spread of infections, and had been unable to adequately conduct preliminary consultations for the summit at the administrative level. The decision to postpone was inevitable given the circumstances.

On the same day, the National Security Council decided on "new steps for the drastic strengthening of border measures."

Main content of the New steps for drastic restructuring of border measures

(March 5, 2020, in operation from March 7)

- 1) Landing refusal for some areas of South Korea and Iran (in operation beginning March 9)
- 2) Request visitors from China (including Hong Kong and Macau) and South Korea to wait 14 days in a given place and not use domestic transport.
- 3) Request to limit incoming airports for passenger flight from China and South Korea to Narita airport and Kansai International Airport (request to suspend operations for passenger vessels).
- 4) Suspension of visas⁴⁹ issued by the Japanese Embassy or Consulates in China and South Korea; suspension of visa exemption measures for Hong Kong, Macau and South Korea.

Such measures had the effect of effectively restricting entry⁵⁰ from China and South Korea, and after the decision by the government's COVID-19 headquarters and Cabinet approval, the operations started on March 7. In addition, of the above, the request for 14-day isolation and suspension of the use of domestic transport for visitors in 2) was also applied to Japanese returning from China and South Korea. There is no provision under the Quarantine Act to isolate returnees from endemic areas or prohibit the use of public transport. However, the government decided to take such measures to strengthen quarantine in the form of non-mandatory "requests" to prevent the spread of the infection.

2.4. Background to the decision to postpone the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games (March)

In an extraordinary video conference by Group of Seven leaders on the night of March 16, Prime Minister Abe described the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games (the Tokyo Games) as "a testimony of human beings defeating COVID-19 and I want to hold them in perfect form," for which he received the support of the G7 leaders. The expression "hold them in perfect form," which Abe himself explained meant that it would be safe and secure for the participating athletes and spectators, and that it would be done without reducing the scale, contained a message from the government that they would not be held without spectators or canceled.⁵¹

As qualifying tournaments in each country and region were canceled and athletes questioned the event, the International Olympic Committee, which had repeatedly insisted the event would be held as planned, announced in the early hours of March 23 that it had started discussions on postponing the event.

When evaluating the IOC's decision in the Upper House Budget Committee on March 23, Prime Minister Abe stated that postponement would be unavoidable if it could not be held “in perfect form.” On the same day, the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee, which has a major influence in the world of international sports, officially requested the IOC to postpone the Tokyo Games, and international public opinion in favor of postponement greatly increased.

On the night of March 24, Prime Minister Abe recognized in a telephone conversation with IOC President Thomas Bach that it would be difficult to hold the Tokyo Games in July as scheduled due to the spread of COVID-19 infections around the world. He proposed postponing the event for about one year. In response, Bach said he agreed 100% with the prime minister's proposal, and the IOC Executive Board subsequently officially decided to postpone the Tokyo Games.

2.5. Background to landing refusals for Europe, North America, etc. (March-April)

2.5.1. Spread of infection in Italy and other European countries

From mid-February, COVID-19 infections spread to countries other than China. South Korea and Iran were the first to face the expansion of infections, and as mentioned in Section 2.3., the government strengthened border measures in response to this in early March. By this time, however, a real crisis was already unfolding in Europe, far from China.

The first case of infection was found in Italy on January 30. The country's prime minister, Giuseppe Conte, announced a state of emergency on the following day, and said the country would suspend all flights from China. Italy's response was swift, and for the next three weeks the situation was deemed to be under control. As of February 20, only three cases were confirmed in Italy. However, since the first death was confirmed on February 21, the number of infected people increased explosively, especially in the three northern regions, and one week later, on February 28, the number of infected people hit 650, and the death toll had reached 17. As of March 5, when the Japanese government decided to refuse landing from some areas of South Korea and Iran, the number of infected people in Italy reached 2,706 and the number of deaths 107.⁵²

The government was also aware that the number of infected people in Italy was increasing at a very fast pace.⁵³ The Foreign Ministry issued a Level 2 infectious disease risk alert (please cease unnecessary and non-urgent travel) for the three northern Italian regions on March 1, raising this to Level 3 (cease travel recommendation) for the three regions from March 6 to 9 and issuing Level 2 for all other parts of Italy. At this point, however, the number of infected people was already increasing in many other European countries as well, with 1,126 cases confirmed in France, 902 in Germany, and 674 in Spain.

2.5.2. Delay in border measures for Europe

In European countries where cross-border movement is free, the infection was deemed to have spread considerably as of the beginning of March at the latest. However, the Japanese government did not introduce the strong border measures that it had taken against China and South Korea vis-a-vis Europe until the latter half of March.⁵⁴ In response to a request from the Expert Meeting on the Novel Coronavirus Disease Control on March 17, the government started a 14-day waiting request for travelers from European countries (Schengen Agreement member countries) including Italy after March 21. A member of the expert panel said that, based on the number of infected people in the first half of March, the influx of COVID-19 cases from Europe and other countries was increasing at a very fast pace during this period, and if the inflow was not curbed, domestic infection could spread explosively.⁵⁵ At this point, the number of infected people in Italy had reached 47,021 with 4,032 deaths, and in Spain more than 20,000 were infected with more than 1,000 deaths, and both France and Germany had more than 10,000 confirmed cases.

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The outline of the timing of the introduction of border measures by the Japanese government from March to April is as follows.

Timing of introduction of border measures by Japan (March 11-April 3)

Date	Type of measure	Applicable regions
3/11	Landing refusal	5 regions in Italy, 8 provinces in Iran, Republic of San Marino
3/18	Infectious disease alert	Level 1 (exercise caution) for the entire world excepting areas issued Level 2 and 3 alert
3/19	Landing refusal	4 regions in Italy, 4 regions in Spain, part of Switzerland, Iceland
3/21	Strengthening quarantine /visa restrictions	38 countries including almost all of Europe, Iran and Egypt
3/26	Strengthening quarantine	All of the U.S.
3/27	Landing refusal	21 European countries and Iran
3/28	Strengthening quarantine /visa restrictions	7 Southeast Asian countries, Israel, Qatar, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Bahrain
3/31	Infectious disease alert	Level 2 (cease unnecessary and non-urgent travel) for the entire world excepting areas issued Level 3 (cease travel recommendation)
4/3	Landing refusal	49 countries/regions including the U.S., U.K., Australia, China, South Korea, Taiwan, almost all of Europe, almost all of Southeast Asia, parts of the Middle East and Africa, parts of Central and South America
4/3	Strengthening quarantine /visa restrictions	The entire world excepting those issued landing refusals

According to the National Institute of Infectious Diseases, a genomic molecular epidemiological survey of the novel coronavirus showed that the virus originating from China's Wuhan at the end of 2019 entered Japan from January to February 2020, but was successfully contained to a certain extent through counter-cluster measures – and that infections in Japan spread nationwide in and after April as a result of the simultaneous influx of viruses from Europe from mid-March to various parts of the country. Therefore, if the border measures for Europe and other countries had been tightened a little earlier, it might have been possible to suppress to some extent the spread of infection in Japan in after April.

Why were the border measures to prevent an inflow of COVID-19 from Europe delayed? A senior health ministry official, who was in charge of the response at the time, said that the government should have acted a little earlier, considering that March is the time when many students travel abroad, but that since movement was free in Europe among the Schengen Agreement countries, it was extremely difficult to determine from

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which country and in what range entry should be refused and officials' response was delayed as they paid close attention to the situation.⁵⁶ On the other hand, a Foreign Ministry official recalls that as of the first half of March, there was not enough data to take strong quarantine measures for European countries.⁵⁷

The expert panel member said the government used the number of infected people per 100,000 population in each region as a standard for strengthening border measures, but that border measures should have been strengthened based on epidemiological information not just limited to the number of infected cases in proportion to the population. He recalled that the views of the government and the experts were "extremely divergent" around mid-March.⁵⁸ Part of the background to the written request for a strengthening of border measures submitted on March 17 by the panel of experts, frustrated with the government's failure to take drastic measures, can be seen in the gap between the government and experts regarding the standards for strengthening border measures.

On the other hand, a staff member at the Prime Minister's Office said he recognized the need to stop people's travel to Europe in early March, given that this was the season for students' overseas travel. But since Prime Minister Abe was "pretty downcast" by the magnitude of the criticism in the public outcry over the government request for the nationwide school closure made around the same time, the official was unable to propose a travel suspension measure at the prime minister's liaison conference, because it was likely to receive further criticism. The official recalled with a real sense of regret, "Looking back now, I think I should have taken measures to suspend travel to Europe at the time. That is my greatest regret."⁵⁹

Following the worldwide spread of COVID-19, the Japanese government continued to strengthen border measures from April, and by mid-May, travelers from 100 countries and regions were denied landing. Similar measures were taken not only in Japan but around the world, with many countries closing their borders and banning the free movement of people.

Notes

1. Government's COVID-19 response headquarters, "Basic action policy for the novel coronavirus" (March 28, 2020), p.9 (12)
2. The submission of residence notification by Japanese nationals abroad has not been carried out extensively because it is not mandatory with penalties, etc., and at the outset, the Foreign Ministry was not even able to accurately grasp the number of Japanese residents. As such, the Japanese embassy in China gradually identified the Japanese residents and the number of people wishing to be repatriated by issuing consular emails and making inquiries to private Japanese companies with a presence in the local area.
3. As a notification for people traveling abroad, the Foreign Ministry has four levels of overseas safety information for each country and region: Level 1 Exercise care; Level 2 Please cease unnecessary and non-urgent travel; Level 3 Please cease travel (Recommendation to cease travel); Level 4 Please evacuate. Please cease travel. (Recommendation to evacuate). However, these have no legal force to prohibit travel or order evacuation.
4. In addition, the Foreign Ministry issued a Level 1 infectious disease risk information (Please exercise

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- care) for all of China on January 21, and on January 23, it raised the infectious disease risk information to Level 2 (Please cease unnecessary and non-urgent travel) for Wuhan.
5. On January 24, a task force was set up within the Foreign Ministry for the protection of Japanese residents, and subsequent studies were mainly conducted by this task force. The task force was first launched with the deputy director of Foreign Policy Bureau as its head, but on January 26, it was upgraded to a countermeasures office headed by the director of the Consular Affairs Bureau.
 6. The Consular Affairs Bureau was established in 2004 against the backdrop of a qualitative and quantitative expansion of consular services in response to the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001 and the SARS epidemic in 2003, being upgraded from a department to a bureau. In less than 20 years after its establishment, Foreign Ministry officials have fundamentally changed their awareness of protecting Japanese nationals through embassies around the world, and protection of Japanese nationals abroad is now recognized as an essential duty of the ministry. (Interview with a Foreign Ministry official)
 7. This businessman had experience working in Japan after studying at the University of Tokyo Graduate School on a scholarship from the Japanese government. He told the media, "Support for the repatriation of Japanese people is not something that happened on its own, but comes from a background of many years of private exchange between China and Japan." ("Behind the scenes, a Chinese businessman talks about supporting the Japanese repatriation mission in Wuhan," Xinhua News Agency, June 12, 2020). A Foreign Ministry official said that without the cooperation of this man, it would not have been possible to transport Japanese nationals in Wuhan in the first place (Interview with a senior Foreign Ministry official).
 8. Envoy Ueno explained the reason why he went to Wuhan and took command despite being No.2 at the Japanese Embassy in China. "In that situation, if there were only people in Wuhan who had to ask Beijing and Tokyo's advice before making any decision, there was no point in forming a team in Wuhan. I thought that it would be useless if there wasn't someone who could represent the government even in relation to Japanese residents and local authorities. (Atsushi Ueno, "A 15-day record of the Wuhan Japanese rescue," Bungei Shunju, September 2020 issue).
 9. At the Japanese Embassy in China, even those seconded from other ministries and agencies who were not in charge of Japanese protection work continued to respond around the clock. According to a Foreign Ministry official, the situation at the time was very difficult, but every time there was a word of gratitude from a Japanese resident, many staff members, including those seconded, felt a sense of pride and worthwhileness about the operation, which helped motivate them in their daily efforts (Interview with a Foreign Ministry official).
 10. In fact, Health, Labor and Welfare Minister Katsunobu Kato said, "The most difficult thing about the Wuhan charter was how to quarantine." (Interview with minister Kato on September 8, 2020)
 11. Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Minister Kazuyoshi Akaba told the Lower House Budget Committee on February 5 that the Japan Tourism Agency had searched for private accommodation at the request of the Cabinet Secretariat, but there was no place willing to accept the returnees other than Katsuura Hotel Mikazuki. In addition, during the question and answer session of the committee, after 8 p.m. on January 28, the deputy chief Cabinet secretary contacted the mayor of Katsuura by telephone informing him that the Katsuura Hotel Mikazuki would be accepting the returnees. It was also revealed that negotiations about accepting the returnees continued until just before the charter flight.
 12. Interview with a medical technical officer at the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry
 13. A Foreign Ministry official said Japan was the only country to initially dispatch rescue aircraft for its own nationals that carried relief supplies at the same time, providing them to the Chinese side.
 14. Interview with a senior Foreign Ministry official
 15. A doctor involved in the series of responses said that he offered his cooperation from a desire to give back to society having gained expert experience at the taxpayers' expense (Interview with a health ministry official)
 16. For the second and subsequent flights, nurses from the Self-Defense Forces Central Hospital were also dispatched.
 17. Passengers were instead given pre-packed food and beverages upon boarding.
 18. Initially, it was planned to ask returnees to pay the regular economy-class fare, but subsequently the

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- fare was fully borne by public funds.
19. These two, however, agreed to submit to a PCR test on January 31, the test result confirming they were negative.
 20. Interview with a medical technical officer of the health ministry
 21. The number of positive patients at the time of repatriation and during the two-week health observation period
 22. Regarding the acceptance of returnees, on January 31, the defense minister issued a disaster dispatch order to the Self-Defense Forces, and the Ground Self-Defense Force's Medical Service personnel were dispatched to the returnees' accommodation facilities to support their daily living.
 23. Interview with a medical technical officer of the health ministry
 24. A system for reporting suspected cases based on the provisions of Paragraph 2, Article 6 of the Infectious Diseases Control Law enforcement regulations, with the aim of quickly grasping outbreak trends for serious infectious diseases of unknown cause. The suspected cases to be notified are defined as “fever, respiratory symptoms, epilepsy, gastrointestinal symptoms or neurological symptoms and other symptoms suspected to be infectious diseases that are judged by doctors, based on generally accepted medical knowledge, to require intensive care or the equivalent, but cannot be diagnosed immediately as a specific infectious disease.”
 25. Interview with health minister Kato (September 8, 2020)
 26. Interview with a Foreign Ministry official
 27. These health cards contained cautions for after entering Japan such as seeing a medical institution if symptoms such as fever and coughing occurred during the stay.
 28. As of January 23, a Level 2 infectious disease risk alert (Please cease unnecessary and non-urgent travel) had been issued for Wuhan.
 29. Clause 8, Article 6, Infectious Diseases Control Law
 30. Item 3, Article 2, Quarantine Act
 31. Regarding quarantinable infectious diseases under the Quarantine Act (which include 1) Class-I infectious diseases under the Infectious Diseases Control Law; 2) pandemic influenza and 3) infectious diseases stipulated in Article 1 of the Quarantine Act enforcement ordinance), passengers could be asked questions (Article 12), and given medical examinations and tests (Article 13) under the law. For patients of 1) or 2) or people suspected of infection with the diseases, such measures as isolation at medical institutions or restricting their activities can also be taken under the law's Article 14. However, such steps could not be taken since COVID-19 was designated as a 3) infectious disease stipulated in Article 1 of the Quarantine Act enforcement ordinance (Item 3, Article 2, Quarantine Act).
 32. These ordinances were originally scheduled to come into force on February 7, but with this decision, they came into force on February 1.
 33. Under the immigration control law (Item 1, Clause 1, Article 5), landing in Japan can be refused for patients or suspected cases of Class-I and Class-II infectious diseases under the Infectious Diseases Control Law, pandemic influenza, designated infectious diseases or people with symptoms of a new infectious disease under the law. However, the immigration control law does not clearly stipulate that landing can be refused simply because the traveller is from an area where these infectious diseases are endemic.
 34. Justice Minister Masako Mori website, “Measures 3 for the novel coronavirus” (February 13, 2020) <https://morimasako.com/2020/02/13/>
 35. This refers to a meeting for deliberating important matters that require highly political judgments regarding situations that may have a serious impact on Japan's security and that are difficult to deal with appropriately under the normal emergency response system, excluding armed attack situations, etc. (A document for the 3rd meeting of the government's COVID-19 headquarters, Item 3, Clause 1, Article 5, National Security Council Establishment Act).
 36. The number of infected people in China, which was 4,537 as of January 28 (including 106 deaths), reached 9,692 (including 212 deaths) as of January 31, both numbers more than doubling in just three days.
 37. WHO “Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) Situation Report-11,” (January 31, 2020) <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/>

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38. Interview with a Prime Minister's Office staff member
39. Interview with a Foreign Ministry official
40. The Prime Minister's Office staff member said the postponement of President Xi's visit to Japan was based on a request from the Chinese side, and revealed that a rough agreement was made for postponing the visit when Yang Jiechi, a member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of China, visited Japan on February 28 (Interview with a Prime Minister's Office staffer).
41. A Foreign Ministry official said that some people within the government had argued that it would be irreparable if the Emperor, who was to meet with President Xi, was infected (Interview with a senior Foreign Ministry official).
42. Interview with senior Cabinet Secretariat official
43. A Cabinet Secretariat official said this infectious disease was a problem that had a very strong impact on international relations and the security of each country. He stated that the National Security Secretariat was put in charge of this matter because it was positioned as an issue related to the entire national security strategy. (Interview with a senior Cabinet Secretariat official)
44. It was also decided to deny entry to foreigners on board vessels on which an outbreak of COVID-19 was feared to take place.
45. On February 13, the first Japanese death from COVID-19 occurred, and the number of people infected was 29.
46. The Foreign Ministry also issued a Level 2 infectious disease risk alert (please cease unnecessary and non-urgent travel) for some areas of Daegu Metropolitan City and Gyeongsangbuk-do on February 25, and on February 28 warned about travel from Japan to the rest of South Korea, such as issuing a Level 1 infectious disease risk alert (please exercise caution) for the whole of South Korea.
47. The number of infected people per 10,000 population in Jiangxi Province was about the same as that in Zhejiang Province as of February 12, when landing refusal measures were taken.
48. Interview with a senior Foreign Ministry official
49. In order for a foreigner to land in Japan, he/she must have a valid passport that has been visa-certified by a Japanese consular officer, etc. (Clause 1, Article 6, immigration control law).
50. South Korea strongly opposed the above measures, saying that there was no prior consultation, and called up Japanese Ambassador to South Korea Koji Tomita to request the withdrawal of these measures. Regarding this, a Foreign Ministry official said that strengthening immigration control was a typical sovereign act, and it was international common sense that prior consultations with the partner country were not held, and even if similar measures were taken by other countries for Japan, no prior consultation would be held, and he said that no other country would protest such measures, expressing confusion over the protest from South Korea (Interview with a senior official of the Foreign Ministry).
51. A Foreign Ministry official said Prime Minister Abe had not given up on the Tokyo Games until about a week before the announcement of the postponement of the event on March 24 (interview with a senior Foreign Ministry official).
52. Italy was the fourth most infected country in the world after China, South Korea and Iran (2,922 cases and 92 dead). In a simple comparison that does not take into account the infected area, the situation in Italy was more serious than in Iran at this point, considering the populations of the two countries (Italy: about 60.46 million, Iran: about 82.8 million) and the number of infected people per 10,000 population (Italy: about 0.45, Iran: 0.35).
53. In fact, Foreign Minister Motegi reported at the government's COVID-19 headquarters meeting on February 26, and health minister Kato reported at the meeting on March 1, that the number of infected people in Italy was increasing significantly.
54. It wasn't until March 11, when the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic, that the government began refusing to land non-Japanese nationals who had been in northern Italy.
55. Interview with a member of the expert panel
56. Interview with a senior health ministry official
57. Interview with a senior Foreign Ministry official
58. Interview with a member of the expert panel
59. Interview with a Prime Minister's Office staffer