

Special interview

Yasutoshi Nishimura Minister in charge of the response to COVID-19
(Economy revitalization minister)

The “Japan model” put the infection under control in liberal ways

- *It appeared that the government was shocked by Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike’s “lockdown” remark on March 23.*

Governor Koike’s “lockdown” remark marked a major turning point, since it was feared it might cause a misunderstanding that the government could enforce measures to punish people for leaving their homes, as was carried out in Western countries that introduced lockdowns. Because it was the end of March and university students were in the spring vacation period, there was concern that people would rush out of Tokyo to other parts of the country if they believed that they wouldn’t be able to do anything if they stayed in Tokyo. That could possibly have spread the infection widely across the country. Therefore, we needed to get people to understand that it wasn’t going to be a lockdown, that they could lead normal lives in Tokyo, but that they would be asked to exercise self-restraint in their activities or close their shops. I think that partly delayed the declaration of the state of emergency.

On the Monday of April 6, the day before the declaration, the prime minister said he would “prepare” to issue [the state of emergency], and before that I and (Shigeru) Omi went to see the prime minister to give our briefings. By the weekend before that, there was an atmosphere that he would finally have to do it. In the previous week, around March 28 or 29, I got a phone call from the prime minister, who said that it was looking like he had better make the declaration sooner than later, and I said I agreed. So, during the period from around March 30 to April 3, I was talking with the experts as to what sectors should be asked to suspend their business or how we should prepare for that, and that the [state of emergency] should be declared after we got people’s understanding that it was not a lockdown. And then the state of emergency was declared on April 7. At that point, many people were making lots of comments, including a Japanese in New York who was telling a TV news program that a week later Tokyo would be just like New York. But after the declaration we did not have an “overshoot” [explosive increase in infections], and new infections began to decline after a while. I believe that the declaration was issued at the last possible timing.

When issuing the state of emergency was discussed within the government, some people were cautious in the presence of the prime minister, because it was expected to

have considerable damage on the economy. I myself, as minister for economy revitalization, knew that we had to brace for that. But looking back on our experience in April, May, or in July and August, I now realize that it's important to detect and respond to [the infection] at an early stage, and I think we need to take more severe measures if necessary. So, we've begun discussions on an amendment to the Act on Special Measures for Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases Preparedness and Response. We're talking with the Cabinet Legislation Bureau as to whether powerful steps can be taken even before a state of emergency is declared.

The special measures act was an armchair legislation

- *When you negotiated with Governor Koike over the scope of the government's request to be made after the declaration of the state of emergency, you said that you would not need to resort to Article 33 of the revised special measures act [empowering the government to issue instructions to prefectural governors]. It was reported that you asked Governor Koike to remove barbers and home improvement centers from the list of sectors to be asked to close their outlets. Did the governor willingly agree to that?*

The special measures act on pandemic influenza and new infectious diseases was an armchair legislation, not based on anything that actually happened. It had also not been applied to a real situation since its enactment. Therefore, the national government, the prefectures or the municipalities had no idea how far they could go. So the Tokyo Metropolitan Government said that it should be able to request businesses across broad sectors to close based on the act's Article 24, Clause 9 (request for suspending business). But according to the interpretation of the law, shops in some sectors needed to be kept open, or we wanted them to remain open, such as pawnshops due to their financial functions. We exchanged our views a few times over that, as well as on the case of businesses like internet cafes. Our officials mulled over detailed points, and we sought the advice of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau when necessary. As a result, we settled on some kind of criteria. Other prefectures were closely watching the exchanges between the national government and the Tokyo Metropolitan government – for clues as to how the act should be used. We were able to come to an agreement that the act should be applied that way. Koike said, "I thought I was a CEO, but then I heard various 'voices from on high' and now I feel like a middle manager." But later on, I told her that it was the "voice of the law." I think it was good that we could come to an understanding as to how much was allowed under the rule of law.

Prime minister's decision on reducing people-to-people contact by "at least 70 percent and as close as possible to 80 percent"

- *How did the discussion go about reducing people-to-people contact by "at least 70% and as close as possible to 80%"?*

We had heated discussion over that. We were initially surprised to hear about an 80% reduction in people's contacts with each other. Did we really need to reduce the contacts by as much as 80%, and could we achieve that by asking people to do it? We discussed that thoroughly. And that was expected to cause enormous damage to the economy. Some people said an 80% cut was too much and impossible. But others said that according to the SIR (susceptible, infected, recovered) model of infectious diseases, reducing people's contact by 80% for a month would be effective [in getting the infections under control]. Eventually, Prime Minister Abe made the decision to go with the expression "at least 70% and as close as possible to 80%."

As a consequence, the target was accepted by the public. We couldn't make it according to the plan, because it took a little more than a month, but we once did manage to get the infection under control. We would really like to express our gratitude to the public for that.

- *Who initially proposed "70%" instead of "80%"?*

At the time, all the people in the discussion gave a variety of views – some said 80% was impossible, others called for 70% or even 50%. But when you look at the SIR model and data, it looked like you had to aim for an 80% reduction. So the prime minister made the final decision to go for "as close as possible to 80%." We spent two to three days discussing that point.

- *Shigeru Omi started to accompany the prime minister in his news conferences beginning on April 7. What was behind that decision?*

Before declaring a state of emergency, the government needs to consult the advisory committee. A supplementary resolution attached to the revision of the special measures act also called on the government to listen to expert opinion before declaring a state of emergency under the law. So, the government makes the final decision after

The Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19: Report on Best Practices and Lessons Learned

seeking the experts' advice. Then everybody thought that it would be better for the prime minister and Dr. Omi (as chair of the advisory committee) to attend the news conference together.

So Dr. Omi and I went to see the prime minister to give our briefings on April 6, the day before the state of emergency was declared. Dr. Omi explained the situation of the infection and suggested that it was time to declare a state of emergency, so the prime minister announced on the evening that day that he would prepare to issue the declaration, and took the procedure on April 7 to declare the state of emergency.

I think it was quite natural that Dr. Omi, as a representative of the experts and as chair of the advisory committee, attended the news conferences and answered questions that required expert knowledge on infectious diseases. There was a sense of trust in Dr. Omi's personal character and his way of giving careful explanation, and I believe that his attendance at the news conferences to give his explanation as an expert had a certain impact.

There are times when recommendations by experts and government's decisions differ, and there will be occasions when it's better for them to hold separate news conferences, each giving explanations in their respective positions, and the government saying it made the final decision for so and so reasons. But at the time, the government declared a state of emergency and was asking people to reduce contacts with others by up to 80%, so I think [Omi] delivering the same message as an expert was effective in deepening people's understanding of the issue.

Heated row over the criteria for lifting the state of emergency

- *Experts are said to have proposed rather stringent criteria for lifting the state of emergency, in view of the capacity of public health centers engaging in countermeasures on infection clusters.*

There were various views even among the experts. In the first place, some experts cautioned against releasing numerical criteria, such as the number of infections, either for lifting the state of emergency or for re-introducing the state of emergency, because they were concerned that such a figure could take on a life of its own. Every day, the media was reporting how the [cumulative number of new infections per 100,000 population] fell below 1 or hit 0.8, and that number was closely watched as they speculated when the state of emergency would be lifted.

What's more important, in fact, is the number of hospital beds. As long as enough numbers of beds are secured for patients with the disease, we can manage an increase in

The Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19: Report on Best Practices and Lessons Learned

infection cases to a certain degree. But you can't reduce the infections to zero, and there will continue to be small-scale infections. You can cope with it as long as there is a system to hold enough PCR tests to prevent the infection from spreading – and if the outbreak is within the range in which you can detect the infections through tests, trace the infection routes with the cluster countermeasures, and contain them. You need to make a comprehensive judgment – you have to take into account such factors as the system and the capacity of public health centers as well as the number of hospital beds for each region.

But the media tends to focus on the sheer number of infected people, and some experts said numerical criteria should not be released because those figures could be taken out of context. But eventually, the experts recommended stringent criteria for the sake of safety – or [the cumulative number of new infections] falling below 0.5 per 100,000 population.

What became a topic of great discussion at the time was the criteria for re-introducing a state of emergency, and the experts didn't disclose any figure for that. Then governors from some prefectures criticized – saying that unless those criteria were made known, they wouldn't know when the state of emergency might be declared again. And I told them that the government would have to consider re-introducing a state of emergency if [the cumulative number of new infections] reached 5 per 100,000 population.

In addition to their concern that numerical criteria could be taken out of context, the experts said [they were guarded about releasing those figures] because the situation could change. And they were right about that. When infections began to increase for the second time, the situation was different from the first time. In the second round, we had large numbers of young people infected, with very few patients falling into a serious condition. Enough hospital beds were secured after the experience of the first round of infection. That's why I told a news conference that things have developed exactly the way the experts predicted.

The experts had a strong opinion that they did not want to release those figures because the situation was changeable and they were uncertain as to what was going to happen. But from the perspective of the public, or prefectural governors, they needed some benchmark figure as they mulled over their daily lives or weighed policy steps. So I mentioned some indicators at the time.

The government listened to the views of experts in a wide range of field

- *The government's expert panel had scholars and researchers on infectious diseases and public health, but some people suggested that the panel should include immunologists or that it should have more experts in clinical medicine on the team. Later, experts from other fields joined the government's COVID-19 subcommittee that took over from the expert panel. What was behind that move?*

The Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19: Report on Best Practices and Lessons Learned

As of April or May, I was aware that I should listen to a variety of opinions from experts in a wide range of field. So in the field of immunology, I asked for opinions from Professor (Yasuhiko) Kamikubo at Kyoto University and Osaka University honorary professor (Masayuki) Miyasaka. I also listened to staff at medical institutions, and talked with people at the University of Tokyo, the National Institute of Infectious Diseases and the National Center for Global Health and Medicine. Each I time I asked the experts for comments on the opinions of other experts.

It's not that experts in a narrow, limited field discussed everything. But I accept that our efforts to listen to other experts in a wide range of fields were not visible to the public. That becomes more important as we move on to the stage where we need to both fight the pandemic and keep up the economy. Earlier, the priority was on putting the infection under control, even at the sacrifice of the economy to some extent. Then as we come to the stage where we need to do both at the same time, we realized the need for a wide variety of opinions in a more visible manner. So we decided to field opinions from wider areas at the Growth Strategy Council-Investing for the Future.

- *The panel of experts held a news conference on June 24 and said the panel had become “forward-leaning” in its stance. Were you informed in advance that members of the expert panel were going to talk to the media on that day?*

For one or two hours each day, I was watching the numbers of infections and deaths in each region along with Dr. Omi, Dr. (Hitoshi) Oshitani, and Dr. (Hiroshi) Nishiura in my office, analyzing what infection clusters were emerging where. So, I understood all along what the experts had in mind. As for that sense of being “forward-leaning,” it seemed to me that members of the expert panel including Dr. Omi were constantly asking themselves what was their role as experts.

The experts held a news conference for 90 minutes or two hours after each meeting of the panel. It was good that the experts carefully explained the situation, and I think that helped deepen people's understanding. But the experts themselves seemed to have a strong sense that they were giving a false impression that they were making decisions on everything. The experts make recommendations to the government, which in turn decides what to do with the recommendations – either implement them 100% or adapt some of them that cannot be carried out. I realized all along that the experts were thinking that such a division of roles must be made clearer.

One example is that in the discussion over when to lift the state of emergency, the experts recommended rather stringent criteria in the cumulative number of new infections per 100,000 population over the latest week. I said that was too severe. Since the experts knew that the number was not going to come down to zero, I told them the

The Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19: Report on Best Practices and Lessons Learned

government would like to make a comprehensive judgment including other factors, such as the emergence of infection clusters, even when the figure was 1 per 100,000 population. The experts said the final judgment rested with the government, and so we consulted the experts at the advisory committee, and they endorsed our basic action policy. But in the earlier stage, the experts recommended stringent criteria.

It looks like the experts were thinking all along that they want to make clear such a division of roles – the experts make recommendations and the government makes the final decision.

Recently, the experts (in the subcommittee) and the government occasionally hold news conferences separately. The experts independently speak to the media especially when they want to make some recommendation as a consensus of the subcommittee members, for example, on the Go To campaign. Then I announce the government's decision in response to that. Or we may hold the news conference together when there's little difference of opinion between us.

The difficulty of risk communication

Here lies the difficulty of risk communication. We get advice from experts in risk communication. There are instances when [the government and the experts] had better hold a news conference together, but we should separately talk to the media when our opinions differ, so as to make clear that the government made the decision under its own responsibility.

– *What were the ideas and thoughts behind the phrase “Japan model”?*

One idea was that Japan got the infection under control in a democratic and very liberal manner. Without the government enforcing a lockdown, the citizens voluntarily cooperated with that effort. In a sense, our herd mentality or peer pressure contributed to building a sense of solidarity. We were able to do that in a liberal way. Another was the sector-by-sector guideline. We created the guideline based on the opinions of experts, and everybody followed that. For example, large numbers of people became infected at sports gyms in March and April, but after we introduced the guideline for restricting the number of users and thorough disinfection and better ventilation of facilities, we have had no infection clusters in recent months. We can both control the infection and sustain business if we do it well. We have introduced no penalties. We have managed to do it in a liberal manner. I think the “Japan model” is about doing it in a democratic and liberal way.

The Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19: Report on Best Practices and Lessons Learned

- *The government's COVID-19 response has produced a certain result, in that the nation managed to contain casualties from the disease at levels far lower than in Western countries and sustain the economy without a lockdown. But popular approval of the government's measures in opinion surveys did not go up – it has gone down instead. What do you think of this gap?*

I feel responsible for that as the person in charge, and I have complex feelings, including frustration over the inability to communicate better with the public. Ultimately, history will hand down its judgment. So I think it will be all right if our efforts were positively evaluated in the long run – if we can put an end to the pandemic while sustaining the economy at the same time. I also believe that the public must be discontented in various ways, because we asked them to endure so much inconvenience under the state of emergency and the economy continues to be in bad shape. To put it smartly, I might say that I could resign myself to playing the thankless role of the baddie being criticized, but I also feel that I would like to win the public's better understanding by giving more careful explanations. I'm also aware of the problems in my own communication, such as the remark that the expert panel had been "abolished." We were about to transform the panel into the subcommittee that includes economic experts so that they could discuss policies from a more comprehensive perspective, but my careless remark caused a misunderstanding. I regret that.

Reviewing the government's COVID-19 response

- *Are you thinking of reviewing the government's COVID-19 response at some point?*

If the review is going to cover everything – including the response to the outbreak aboard the cruise ship and the issue of masks – that will involve a lot of work, so I think we should do that in a quiet environment, after the vaccines and medicines have been developed. We are still on the frontlines of combating the pandemic. We're thinking of releasing the minutes of discussions soon. If you see the gist of discussions at recent meetings of the subcommittee, you can see everything that is being discussed in detail. We need to keep the records of the discussion. Also, I'm thinking that we should review the SIR model. We relied on the SIR model because that was the only mathematical model available, but there are, in fact, various other models, so we're now trying those. I also want to examine the difference [in the situation] between the July-August period and the April-May period. When the infections increased in July and August, the government didn't declare a state of emergency, but Osaka and Aichi prefectures individually issued requests for closing shops or shortening business hours in the entertainment districts of

The Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response
to COVID-19: Report on Best Practices and Lessons Learned

Minami [in Osaka] and Nishiki and Sakae [in Nagoya]. I'd like to see how effective those measures were in curbing infection. Also, I think we should closely examine how the government makes its decisions based on the assessments by experts. I basically respect the assessment of experts, so I don't think there have been significant discrepancies. But political judgments were made in some aspects [of the COVID-19 response], and we should see the minutes, gist and records of discussions to closely examine what decisions were made on the basis of what judgment.

(The interview was held via an online videoconference on September 15, 2020)