

Japan

Japan's emperor voices concern about Covid spread during Olympics

Naruhito said to be '**extremely worried**' and shares widespread **public unease** over the Games



Emperor Naruhito is forbidden by **Japan**'s postwar constitution from making public statements on contentious issues. Photograph: Rodrigo Reyes Marin/AP

Justin McCurry in Tokyo Thu 24 Jun 2021 12.02 BST

Japan's emperor has voiced concern over the possible spread of coronavirus during the **Tokyo 2020 Olympics**, in an unexpected intervention in the debate over holding the Games in the middle of a pandemic.

Naruhito, who **ascended** the Chrysanthemum throne in 2019 after his father, Akihito, abdicated, said he shared widespread public concern about the Games, which open in a month's time.

"The emperor is extremely worried about the current status of **coronavirus** infections," Yasuhiko Nishimura, the grand steward of the Imperial Household Agency, told a regular news conference on Thursday.

"Given the public's worries, he appears to be concerned about whether the event would cause infections to spread," Nishimura added, according to Kyodo news agency.

As a symbol of the state, Naruhito is forbidden by **Japan**'s postwar constitution from making public statements on contentious issues, but his reported remarks will encourage those who fear the Olympics could lead to a rise in Covid-19 infections.

A recent Kyodo poll showed about 86% of people in **Japan** are worried about the risk of a rebound in Covid cases if the Olympics go ahead this summer.

Naruhito did not call for the Games to be cancelled or postponed – options supported by most Japanese people, according to recent opinion polls.

“I would like the organising committee and other related organisations to work together and take all possible measures to prevent infection,” Nishimura said.

The 61-year-old emperor is honorary patron of the Olympics and Paralympics and could attend the Olympic opening ceremony on 23 July.

The government’s top spokesperson, Katsunobu Katō, played down the remarks, describing them as Nishimura’s “personal views”.

“I would like to ask the Imperial Household Agency for details, but as I have said, we will realise a safe and secure Games,” Katō said.

Naruhito’s comments came as cases appeared to be rising again in the Olympic host city, days after the government ended a full state of emergency in Tokyo and several other regions.

On Thursday, Tokyo reported 570 infections, a rise of 118 from the same day last week. On Wednesday it confirmed 619 new cases, exceeding 600 for the first time in almost a month.

Japan’s initially slow vaccine rollout has picked up speed with more than 50% of older people having received their first dose, according to public broadcaster NHK, but the Olympics will open while much of the population is still not fully protected.

A health ministry panel said the virus had started to rise in Tokyo after remaining flat. “The trend in Tokyo is already showing signs of a rebound,” said the health minister, Norihisa Tamura, according to the Asahi newspaper.

Advisers to the Tokyo metropolitan government said people had started moving around more since emergency restrictions were **lifted** on Monday and replaced with less stringent measures.

They said that could cause infections to creep up, adding there were signs that more infectious variants could spread rapidly in coming weeks and months.

“Although we’re now in a ‘quasi’ state of emergency, the situation is still very dire,” said Tokyo’s vice-governor, Mitsuchika Tarao. Tarao is standing in for the governor, Yuriko Koike, who was admitted to hospital this week with fatigue.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Tokyo 2020 organisers drew criticism after deciding this week that a limited number of Japanese spectators will be **permitted to watch events** this summer. Attendances will be capped at 50% of a venue’s capacity or a maximum of 10,000 spectators.