

Virus Outbreak: Taiwan to evacuate cruise passengers

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The Diamond Princess cruise ship is docked at the Daikoku Pier Cruise Terminal in Yokohama, Japan, on Friday.

Photo: EPA-EFE

The government is negotiating with Japanese officials to arrange the evacuation of Taiwanese passengers quarantined on a cruise ship off the coast of Yokohama, Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung (陳時中) said yesterday.

The Diamond Princess, with about 3,500 passengers and crew on board, was placed under a 14-day quarantine on Feb. 4, when it was scheduled to dock in Yokohama. Confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection on the ship have been rapidly increasing since then.

The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare yesterday said that 67 new cases of COVID-19 infection have been confirmed, bringing the total number of infected passengers and crew to 285.

While the US government is making arrangements to evacuate Americans from the ship, the Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) said that it has also been negotiating with Japanese officials to conduct a similar operation.

Two Taiwanese passengers who had been confirmed to have been infected with COVID-19 were hospitalized in Japan for treatment, it said.

“We have been discussing evacuation plans with Japanese authorities,” said Chen, who heads

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the CECC. “They have shown a responsible attitude, so we can trust them.”

He said a charter flight would be arranged to bring the Taiwanese home once officials agree on the details of the evacuation.

The evacuation from the cruise ship would not involve prioritizing vulnerable people, as was the case during an evacuation of Taiwanese from Wuhan, China, and all 20 passengers would be brought back, he said.

“We will arrange a China Airlines (華航) flight,” Chen said. “The Japanese authorities are very careful in handling the case, so the problem at hand is how to bring them back, rather than whether we can bring them back.”

Separately yesterday, the CECC said it has instructed healthcare professionals to test, when in doubt, people who have visited Singapore or Thailand 14 days prior to entering Taiwan for COVID-19 and who have a fever or sore throat.

The move is in response to the spread of the virus in the two countries, the CECC said.

Additional reporting by CNA

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