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U.S. to Evacuate 380 Americans From Cruise Ship Quarantined in Japan with 218 Cases of Coronavirus

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Ernice Gilbert **February 15, 2020**

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Quarantined Diamond Princess cruise ship docked in Yokohama, Japan. By. FRANCK ROBICHON/EPA, VIA SHUTTERSTOCK

The U.S. government on Friday said it will evacuate American citizens currently quarantined on the cruise ship Diamond Princess in Japan. With 218 confirmed cases of coronavirus aboard the ship, it is the site of the largest outbreak outside of China.

Americans and their families on the ship, which is currently docked in Yokohama, Japan, will be provided with seats aboard two planes flying back to the U.S., said Henry Walke, director of the Center of Disease Control and Prevention's Division of Preparedness and Emerging Infections. The flights were organized by the State Department and are expected to leave Japan early Sunday.

The ship, at the time with 3,700 passengers, was placed on a two-week quarantine on Feb. 5. The first case is believed to have been passed to others aboard the ship by a passenger who got off in Hong Kong and was later diagnosed with the coronavirus. It remains unknown, however, how so many Diamond Princess passengers got infected.

According to China's National Health Commission, as of Friday night, confirmed cases in the country grew to 66,500. Globally, over 1,500 individuals have died from the virus, with only three being outside of Japan. Coronavirus causes a respiratory illness called Covid-19.

Yet while hundreds of Americans will be evacuated, not all will be allowed on the flights on Sunday. Dr. Walke said Americans with fever, cough or other symptoms won't be allowed on the flights.

He said the evacuees will arrive first at Travis Air Force Base near Sacramento, Calif., where they will undergo additional health screenings. There will most likely be mandatory quarantining for some of the passengers, which is expected to last for 14 days. Other passengers may be moved to the Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas to be quarantined.

According to the Wall Street Journal, the Travis Air Force Base is already the quarantine site for roughly 230 people evacuated earlier this month from Wuhan, the epicenter of the outbreak, and Dr. Walke spoke in a town hall meeting with those people on Friday. These evacuees will be kept separate from the fresh group arriving from the ship. Dr. Walke said the group from Wuhan is being housed in a hotel on the base, however those from the ship will stay in another area about 200 meters away from the Wuhan group.

"We're not going to mix anyone," Dr. Walke said during the Friday meeting, prompting some laughter, according to WSJ. "This group is going to stay within this fence. If we take another group, we are putting a fence up over there."