

Withdrawal symptoms

With Australia and Canada threatening boycott, International Olympic Committee admits that postponing the Games to next year now a realistic possibility

ASSOCIATED PRESS
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THE TOKYO Olympics are probably going to happen, but almost surely in 2021 rather than in four months as planned. That became clear after the IOC on Sunday announced it was considering a postponement and would make a final decision within four weeks. Major Olympic nations like Canada and Australia have added pressure by saying they will not send teams if the Games are staged this year.

International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach sent a letter to athletes explaining the decision, while also acknowledging the extended timeline might not be popular. "I know that this unprecedented situation leaves many of your questions open," he wrote. "I also know that this rational approach may not be in line with the emotions many of you have to go through."

The IOC's move seemed inevitable for weeks with pressure mounting from all quarters — athletes, sponsors, broadcasters, more than 200 national Olympic committees and international sports federations.

Shortly after Bach's statement, the Canadian Olympic Committee said it would not send athletes to the Olympics unless the Games are postponed by a year. Australia issued a statement saying it was advising its athletes to prepare for an Olympics in 2021.

John Coates is the head of the Australian Olympic Committee and the IOC member who heads the inspection team for Tokyo.

World Athletics President Sebastian Coe sent a letter to Bach saying that holding the Olympics in July "is neither feasible nor desirable." He outlined a number of reasons, including competitive fairness, the likelihood athletes would over-train if given a compressed schedule and the uncertainty caused by orders in many countries barring people from gyms and other workout venues.

National Olympic committees in Brazil and Slovenia had also called for postponement until 2021. Norway's Olympic body said it did not want athletes going to Tokyo until the global health crisis is under control.

The United States governing bodies of swimming and track — two of the three top-tier Summer Games sports — had called on their national Olympic officials to push for a postponement.

Hosts get realistic

Japan's politicians fell in line quickly on Monday as they awakened to Bach's move, which was announced at 3 am in Tokyo as most of the city slept. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, speaking at a parliamentary session, said a postponement of the Tokyo Olympics would be necessary if the Games cannot be held in a complete way because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"If it is difficult to hold (the Games) in a complete way, a decision of postponement would be unavoidable," he said.

Abe said he hoped the IOC would announce a decision quickly, and Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike echoed him.



The IOC's move seemed inevitable with pressure mounting from all quarters — athletes, sponsors, broadcasters, more than 200 national Olympic committees and international sports federations. AP

The IOC holds most of the cards in any rescheduling, spelled out in a Host City Contract signed in 2013 between the IOC, the Japanese Olympic Committee and the city of Tokyo.

Financial pitfalls

Japan is officially spending \$12.6 billion to organise the Olympics, but a national audit put the figure at more than twice that much. The bill is sure to increase with any postponement, and the vast majority of the spending is from the public treasury.

The IOC has a reserve fund of about \$2 billion to tide itself over, and also has insurance against postponement or cancellation.

Yoshiro Mori, the president of the organising committee, said he talked with Bach by teleconference about the delay and was joined by CEO Toshiro Muto. "Honestly speaking, four weeks is quite a short time to consider all the necessary elements," Mori said at a Monday news conference. "It requires a tremendous amount of time and we have to hurry to go through this." Both were asked about added cost, and who would pay. And both shied away from a direct response.

Mori said cost calculations had to be made, and the availability of venues — presumably

for next summer in the northern hemisphere — had to be examined. A decision also has to be made about who pays for the maintenance of venues if the Olympics are postponed. Similar questions will be asked about the massive Olympic Village, which is to house 11,000 Olympians and 4,400 Paralympians before the high-priced units around Tokyo Bay are sold off by private developers.

"I respect Mr. Bach," Mori said. "And we trust Mr. Bach. We have been always together walking side by side. I consider Mr. Bach as my best friend." The 82-year-old Mori, a former prime minister who has been undergoing treatment for an undisclosed illness, was asked if he could endure more work on the Olympics. He called it a "rude" question.

"I've got about two years left to live," he replied, half smiling as he said it.

Public not keen

The Olympic torch arrived last Friday in northern Japan from Greece. The torch relay it set to begin on Thursday from Fukushima prefecture, the area devastated by the 2011 earthquake, tsunami and the meltdown of three nuclear reactors. Organisers said the relay is still on, but said plans could change

very quickly. On Sunday, thousands crowded the northern city of Sendai to view the flame, which forced organisers to restrict the entry for viewing. Jeff Kingston, who studies Japanese politics at Temple University in Tokyo, said postponed Olympics will be a minor worry for most people.

"The public is expecting and supports postponement, so it won't be a big deal," Kingston said in an email. "People are way more worried about the economic consequences and their jobs and if the number of cases ramps up." A recent poll by Japanese news agency Kyodo said 69.9 per cent did not expect the Olympics to open on schedule.

As of Sunday, Japan had 1,719 confirmed cases of the virus, including 712 from a cruise ship, with 43 deaths. Former IOC marketing director Michael Payne said the delay might work to the advantage of the IOC and Japan.

"What better platform is there going to be than the Olympic Games when the world has pulled through the virus," Payne said in an interview on Sunday, just before the IOC announcement. "You've got a dynamic that will be even more powerful for Japan and the rest of the world. But you are going to have a tough road getting there."

'Not like moving a football game'

Postponement will be an unprecedented and costly exercise that involves ripping up years of planning, and IOC chief Thomas Bach said as much. Here are some of the challenges:

Competition scheduling

As specialist website Inside the Games put it, the Olympics "gravitate around... a four-year cycle. If you wake up and the sun is in a completely different place, there are going to be consequences".

Much depends on the length of any postponement but shoehorning an Olympics into what is already a packed sporting calendar in 2021, for example, will be a logistical nightmare for athletes, administrators and broadcasters.

One potential clash is the World Athletics Championships, currently scheduled for August 2021 in the United States — a lucrative pay-day for athletes and TV networks.

Swimming is also scheduled to hold its World Championships in Japan from July 16 to August 1, 2021.

Adding to the crowded schedule is football's European Championships, already postponed from 2020 to 2021.

Olympic legend Carl Lewis has put the case for holding the Summer Games in 2022 alongside that year's Winter Games in Beijing, creating a "celebratory Olympic year".

Venues

There are 43 Olympic sites — some temporary, some purpose-built, others repurposed for the Tokyo 2020 Games — and all of them present difficulties in the event of a postponement.

The IOC highlighted this as one of the main concerns, warning: "A number of critical venues needed for the Games could potentially not be available anymore."

For example, one of the main selling points of the brand new 68,000-seater Olympic Stadium was that it would hold "cultural and sporting events" after the Games were over. Any such event would now need to be moved if it clashes with a rescheduled Games.

And it's not just sporting venues. Organisers have block-booked the enormous Tokyo Big Sight exhibition centre to host the thousands of international journalists covering the Games.

This is one of Asia's premier venues for hosting large-scale conferences, and is booked many months in advance. Finding a suitable slot or persuading others to move could also be a challenge.

Athletes' village

A major question marks hangs over the athletes' village, which occupies some prime real estate overlooking Tokyo Bay with a view of the city sky-

line and its famous Rainbow Bridge.

It will have 21 towers of between 14 and 18 floors with a total capacity of 18,000 beds during the Olympics and 8,000 for the Paralympics.

The plan was to renovate and convert the village into thousands of luxury condos, which are being sold off or put up for rent.

According to the website of the Harumi Flag developers, some 4,145 units were to be put up for sale. Viewings and sales of a first batch of 940 apartments began in summer 2019 and the vast majority have already been snapped up, according to Japanese media.

Postponement would mean delaying the renovation process and huge uncertainty for those who have already signed contracts — including whether force majeure clauses would be triggered.

Hotels

Among the "many, many" challenges the IOC mentioned, it highlighted that "the situations with millions of nights already booked in hotels is extremely difficult to handle".

In fact, one of the concerns before the coronavirus hit was a possible dearth of hotel rooms. One idea was to park a cruise ship offshore for emergency accommodation — now surely a non-starter given the experience with cruise ships and the virus.

Hotel rooms have been block-booked in advance for many months. Many have paid a large deposit in advance and could face losing this, in addition to having to re-book quickly for a postponed date.

The hotel industry would also face huge uncertainty if the Games are delayed, adding to the headache already posed by a catastrophic drop in tourism.

Silver lining

A postponement by a few months to later in 2020 might solve what had previously been the biggest concern over the Tokyo Olympics: the sweltering heat of the Japanese summer.

It could even be conceivable to move the marathon back to Tokyo after it was shifted to the northern city of Sapporo amid fears over athletes' health in the summer heat and humidity of the Japanese capital.

However, going ahead in the autumn would also put the Olympics in prime typhoon season — as the Rugby World Cup found out to its cost last year.

A delay could also give sporting federations more time to prepare qualifying events, addressing one of the main concerns voiced by athletes.

AFP

Will wait and watch for a month before decision: IOA after two countries pull out

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 23

THE INDIAN Olympic Association on Monday said it will "wait and watch" for at least a month before taking any call on Tokyo Olympics participation after Canada created a flutter by becoming the first nation to pull out of the showpiece due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The north American nation's withdrawal added to the International Olympic Committee's woes after a host of top athletes and powerful sports bodies rammed up pressure on the IOC to postpone the quadrennial extravaganza in July-August.

However, India is ready to wait for a while before arriving at a final decision as it monitors the fast-evolving situation triggered by the pandemic, which has killed more than 14,000 and infected over 300,000. "Being the head of IOA, the health and well being of our athletes and officials are of prime concern to me," IOA President Narinder Batra told PTI. "Whatever decisions the IOA takes will be for the welfare of our athletes. But right now we are just waiting and monitoring the situation on a daily basis."

"I assure the people that we won't let anyone down and our decisions will be in the best interest of our athletes," he added.

IOA Secretary General Rajeev Mehta put a timeline to this wait and watch approach, saying it would be at least a month before anything is decided. "We will wait and watch for 4 to 5 weeks and then come to any decision after consultation with the International Olympic Committee and the sports ministry," Mehta said.

"The situation is not that bad in our country as compared to other nations," he added. The Olympics are looking increasingly uncertain after the IOC admitted that it would consider all options, including postponement, in four weeks from now.

The virus, which was first discovered in



The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the Olympic preparations of India's top athletes such as PV Sindhu. Express

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RAJIV MEHTA,
IOA SECRETARY GENERAL

China, has wreaked havoc on Olympic preparations of athletes, including those from India. Several qualifiers have been suspended and training trips abroad are off the table thanks to the travel restrictions all over the world.

When contacted and asked if India is also contemplating acting on the lines of Canada, Sports Secretary Radhey Shyam Julaniya said the ministry is not in consul-

tation with anyone at the moment.

"Your question is hypothetical and the government cannot react to hypothetical questions," he said. "We are not in consultation with anyone right now. The ministry can't keep giving advisories," Julaniya added. Canada became the first country to pull out of the Tokyo Games due to coronavirus and Australia told its athletes to prepare for an Olympics next year as Japan and the IOC flagged the prospect of a postponement for the first time.

Mehta said India's handling of the crisis has been decent till now. "We are not thinking about postponement at this moment. We will wait for a month and discuss with IOA President Narinder Batra and the Executive Committee of the IOA."

The total number of COVID-19 cases in India has crossed 400, including seven deaths so far.

ASSOCIATED PRESS/REUTERS
GENEVA, MARCH 23

THE FUTURE of football could be fewer games and fewer top competitions to help avoid a financial crisis, FIFA president Gianni Infantino said in a newspaper interview published on Monday. With football around the world in near-total shutdown and no end in sight because of the coronavirus pandemic, Infantino said the sport risked going into recession.

"Maybe we can reform world football by taking a step back," Infantino said in the interview with Italian daily Gazzetta dello Sport published on his 50th birthday.

"There needs to be an evaluation of the global impact," the FIFA president said. "Let's all together save soccer from a crisis that risks becoming irreversible." Infantino said different formats could be an answer, with "fewer, but more interesting tournaments. Maybe fewer squads, but more balance. Fewer, but more competitive, matches to safeguard the health of the players."

Before the pandemic, Infantino added to the congested football calendar by expanding the World Cup from 32 to 48 teams for the 2026 edition, and by trying to launch a 24-team Club World Cup next year. The inaugural edition of the latter tournament in China was delayed last week after UEFA and South American football body CONMEBOL postponed their championships by one year to 2021. That was to give domestic leagues time to try to finish their seasons.

The shutdown means there are already too few dates in the FIFA-managed calendar to complete the scheduled qualification paths for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

The pressure now on football stakeholders — many with conflicting interests — is likely to force a debate on the squeezed schedule that the pandemic has exposed.

Some influential clubs in Europe are pushing to get more guaranteed games in a bigger Champions League, and 20-team top leagues could be under pressure to make cuts. Those include leagues in England, Spain and Italy. "It's not science fiction. Let's discuss it," Infantino said about the possibility



Gianni Infantino wants fewer games and fewer top competitions. Reuters

of changing football calendars.

FIFA announced last month a task force of officials from member federations, clubs, leagues and player unions that would look at drafting a new match calendar from 2024. That work could also now include the next four years to adjust to the current shutdown.

La Liga postponed indefinitely as coronavirus crisis worsens

Barcelona: The Spanish football calendar has been postponed until further notice, La Liga and the Spanish football federation (RFEF) said in a joint statement on Monday.

All organised football in Spain had been postponed for two weeks due to the spread of the coronavirus but was initially due to resume on April 3.

The statement said a joint commission between the two bodies had agreed to postpone all professional football competitions until the Spanish government considered they could start again "without creating any health risk".

RFEF chief Luis Rubiales last week ruled out cancelling the current season, insisting the campaign would resume once the health crisis was under control. "Both the RFEF and La Liga wish to express our greatest public gratitude to all those who are dedicating their best efforts to provide essential services to the Spanish people," added the statement. "We also share our condolences for all the deceased and a warm embrace from the world of soccer to the many families that are losing loved ones."

More than 33,000 people have been infected by the virus in Spain, the second-worst affected country in Europe behind Italy, while over 2,180 people have died from it according to the country's health ministry.

Arsenal cancel training despite completing isolation period

London: Arsenal have advised their players, who were to resume training on Tuesday, to stay at home even though they completed their 14-day isolation period after manager Mikel Arteta tested positive for the coronavirus.

Arteta's positive test forced the team to go into self-isolation, while the Premier League has suspended the football season until April 30. "As a result of the current situation, we are clear it would be inappropriate and irresponsible to ask players to come back at this time," Arsenal said in a statement on Monday. "Therefore our men's first team, women and academy players are all remaining at home."

The club also confirmed they would continue paying matchday and non-matchday casual workers until April 30 despite the suspension. Manchester United announced last week that they would keep paying their casual staff even if the season's remaining games were cancelled or played in empty stadiums.

"These are challenging times for everyone, but in particular our casual workers," said Arsenal Managing Director Vinai Venkatesham. "This gesture is intended to ease their financial uncertainty." Football Association rules say the season should end by June 1 but the FA, Premier League, EFL and women's professional game bodies, along with players' and managers' associations, have agreed to extend the formal end-date for the 2019-20 season.