

International

Heat, floods and quakes: Tokyo 2020 preparing for any disaster

Japan making contingency plans for possible catastrophes

TOKYO: Cyberattacks, terrorism, earthquakes and heatwaves: Tokyo 2020 organizers are hoping for the best but bracing for the worst and making contingency plans for several possible catastrophes during the Games. Clean, virtually crime-free Tokyo has been spared the terror attacks that have hit many Western cities in recent years, and is considered a relatively safe bet for the Games - it is often ranked as low-risk by insurance and risk-management firms.

But that security goes out of the window when it comes to hosting the Greatest Show on Earth, says Shiro Kawamoto, counter-terrorism expert and professor of risk management at Nihon University. "Tokyo's safeness in normal times cannot be taken for granted during the Olympics when the world's attention is on it," Kawamoto said. So Tokyo is pulling out all the technological stops to bolster safety - for example, in an Olympic first, introducing a facial recognition system for volunteers.

Organizers are also bracing for a cyberattack similar to that which blighted the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics opening ceremony, where internet and wifi access were brought down. "We are preparing on the assumption there will be a cyberattack," said Kenji Endo, a senior government official in charge of

Tokyo 2020. The government has set up an elite unit of police and defense ministry experts to counter a possible cyber threat.

For terrorist attacks, Tokyo has not experienced a large-scale atrocity since the Aum Shinrikyo doomsday cult released Sarin gas on the subway in 1995, killing 13 people and injuring dozens more. But an attack on New Year's Eve - where a man deliberately rammed a car up one of Tokyo's best-known streets and injured nine people - jolted Tokyo out of its complacency.

Counter-terrorism drills are being conducted regularly and officials are urging the public to be vigilant. With petty crime much lower than in other major capitals, people generally pay little attention to abandoned baggage, for example. "To avoid a suspicious object in a train suddenly exploding, someone has to spot it and call police or station staff," Kawamoto said.

'Most dangerous period'
The ever-present threat of natural disasters is also keeping Olympics officials up at night, with Tokyo being one of the world's most seismically active capitals and Japan battered last year by typhoons and heatwaves. "As for natural disasters, we think the biggest challenge is to

prepare for a big quake that is impossible to predict," said Akio Sato, senior official at the Tokyo Metropolitan Government.

Rigid building codes mean even strong tremors often do little damage but the government estimates up to 23,000 could die if a magnitude seven quake hit Tokyo directly. Panic and a lack of preparation could cause more unnecessary damage, experts warn. Mindful that hundreds of thousands will be coming from overseas, the Japan Tourism Agency has upgraded its "safety tips" app with information on major disasters, evacuation shelters and medical organizations.—AFP



TOKYO: People protect their heads during a disaster drill at Sensoji Temple in Tokyo. Cyberattacks, terrorism, earthquakes and heatwaves: Tokyo 2020 organizers are hoping for the best but bracing for the worst and making contingency plans for several possible catastrophes during the Games. — AFP

Suffer the children: How air pollution hurts the youngest

TOKYO: Air pollution can have devastating health effects for people of all ages, but children are more vulnerable and face specific risks that can last a lifetime, experts say.

Why are kids more vulnerable?

Children breathe faster than adults and are smaller "so they end up getting a higher dose of air pollution into their lungs relative to their body mass than adults," said Rima Habre, assistant professor of clinical preventative health at the University of Southern California (USC). Children are also closer to the ground, where some types of pollutants tend to concentrate, and can be exposed to dirty air for longer stretches if they play outside. But air pollution isn't only found outdoors. Some of the most serious air pollution is in homes where heating and cooking fires burn fuel incompletely, producing hazardous fumes.

These are disproportionately inhaled by young children and their mothers, who spend more time inside and often close to the home's stove. Children's organs are also still growing and pollution can slow the development of the lungs, brain and other organs in ways that can have life-long effects. "Children have a long lifetime ahead of them during which even diseases with a long latency pe-

What are the effects on children?

The consequences of air pollution can be immediate but can also manifest over the longer term. The most obvious immediate effects are respiratory. Children exposed to air pollution are more susceptible to infections including pneumonia and bronchitis, as well as asthma. Research into how exactly air pollution causes these problems is still ongoing, but the World Health Organization says dirty air contributed to respiratory tract infections that resulted in 543,000 deaths in children under five in 2016. And there are other less obvious effects including on "biological pathways," Breton said. "There is some evidence to suggest air pollution may shift metabolic or stress response pathways that could then put children at greater risk for diabetes later in life or cardiovascular diseases," she added. The WHO also says there is "substantial evidence" that traffic-related air pollution "is associated with increased risk of childhood leukaemia." Other research has linked air pollution to childhood obesity, persistent ear infections and neurodevelopment issues that can lead to lower cognitive test outcomes and may influence behavioral disorders.

What about in the womb?

Children are exposed to the health dangers of air pollution even while they are still in the womb. "Gases and ultrafine particulates can penetrate deep into the lungs of the mothers and enter their bloodstream. These particles have been found in placenta," said professor Neil Thomas of the University of Birmingham's Institute of Applied Health Research. —AFP

Over 100 Malaysian schools shut after toxic waste dump

KUALA LUMPUR: Over 100 schools in Malaysia have been closed after the dumping of toxic waste into a river caused hundreds of people to fall ill, including many children, authorities said. A lorry is believed to have dumped the waste in southern Johor state last week, sending hazardous fumes across a wide area and causing those affected to display symptoms of poisoning such as nausea and vomiting.

Over 500 people, many of them school pupils, have received medical treatment after inhaling the fumes, with over 160 admitted to hospital, according to official news agency Bernama. It was unclear what type of poisonous gas had been emitted near the industrial town of Pasir Gudang. Education Minister Maszlee Malik initially ordered the closure of 43 schools in the area Wednesday, but later announced that figure had more than doubled.

"The ministry of education has decided to close all 111 schools in the Pasir Gudang area immediately," he said in a statement. "The education ministry is requesting that all parties take precautions." Three men were arrested earlier this week over the toxic waste dumping. One is expected to be charged in court soon and could face up to five years in jail if found guilty of breaking environmental protection laws.—AFP