

Sports

Japan dismisses report of Olympics' cancellation, teams back Games

Host nation battles third wave of coronavirus

TOKYO: Japan dismissed a report claiming officials see cancelling the Tokyo Olympics as inevitable on Friday, as heavyweights the United States, Canada and Australia said they were still preparing for the Games.

Deputy government spokesman Manabu Sakai said there was "no truth" to the report in The Times, which quoted an unnamed ruling coalition source as saying "the consensus is that it's too difficult" to hold the Olympics. It is the latest report to cast doubt on the troubled 2020 Games, which were postponed over the coronavirus last year but have been hit by a surge in cases and plunging public support. Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga on Friday insisted he was "determined" to hold the event "as proof that mankind will have overcome the virus".

Tokyo 2020 organizers said they were "fully focused on hosting the Games this summer". And the national Olympic committees of the United States, Canada and Australia all said they were preparing to send teams to Japan. The statements from Canada and Australia contrast with last year, when they withdrew their athletes before officials took the unprecedented decision to postpone. However, despite denying the British report, Sakai said a decision was looming for Japan.

"At some point in time, we will naturally make a decision as to whether to actually hold it," he said. "Until then the Japanese government will do what it needs to do and make progress and prepare for it."

Concerns have risen as Japan battles a third wave of coronavirus infections, with polls showing around 80 percent of Japanese oppose hosting the event this year. The Olympics have never been cancelled in peacetime.

International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Thomas Bach said there was "no reason whatsoever" for them not to go ahead on July 23 as scheduled. "Everybody is really determined to make these Olympic Games," Bach said in a video message on Friday. "All the prospects are good and we are working hard." The World Health Organization's emergencies director Michael Ryan said on Friday the Tokyo Olympic Games were still viable, but remained cautious.

"We don't contribute to the decision-making regarding the holding or not holding of the Olympics," he said. "The best way we can get to an Olympics is get on top of this disease. I have every confidence in the Japanese people and in their public health and governmental authorities. We all hope in the Olympics but we all recognize that everyone right now is a little afraid, as we enter the New Year, with some uncertainties."



TOKYO: In this file photo taken on July 22, 2018 Mascots for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics Games Miraitowa and Someity appear at their debut event in Tokyo. — AFP

"Tokyo Games are on"

Japan and the IOC took the historic step of postponing the Games last March as COVID-19 spread around the world. On Friday, Australian Olympic Committee CEO Matt Carroll ruled out another withdrawal, calling reports of the Games' cancellation "unfounded rumor".

"The Tokyo Games are on," he said. The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee stopped short of a vote of confidence, but said it remained focused on preparing for the Games. "We have not received any information suggesting the Games will not happen as planned, and our focus remains on the health and preparedness of Team USA athletes ahead of the Games this summer," the USOPC tweeted.

The chairman of the British Olympic Association, Hugh Robertson, told AFP he believed the Games would take place, although with "many fewer spectators in venues". "Clearly there is uncertainty around but I am as confident as one can be the Games will go ahead in some shape or form," he said.

Tokyo governor Yuriko Koike said she had no idea where The Times had obtained its information, insisting cancellation had not been discussed. "We've been firmly

coordinating with the government, the organizing committee and the IOC... and the truth is that there has been no talk of cancellation or postponement," she told reporters.

Tokyo 2020 CEO Toshiro Muto said last week that the organizing committee is "unwavering" on holding the event this year, but couldn't rule out staging it without spectators. But domestically there is rising doubt, with opposition lawmakers in parliament on Thursday calling for the Games to be postponed or cancelled.

And on Friday, the Tokyo Medical Association called for the event to be held behind closed doors. "They must give up the idea of having the festivity of the century by inviting people from various countries," its chairman Haruo Ozaki told the Asahi Shimbun newspaper. "The feasibility of holding it with no spectators should be considered."

Sebastian Coe, the global president of the Games' showpiece sport, track and field, said such a solution would be acceptable. "I would love to have fans, noisy and passionate," Coe told the BBC. "But if the only way we're able to deliver it is behind closed doors, I think everybody is accepting of that." — AFP

Strict virus measures for Club World Cup

DOHA: The Club World Cup will be staged with strict measures to combat the spread of COVID-19, the Qatari organizers said yesterday less than two weeks before the tournament which will be closed to overseas fans. It is due to get underway on February 4 with spectator numbers capped at 30 percent of capacity at each of the two 40,000-seat grounds which will host games.

"Fans will have to undergo rapid PCR or antigen tests up to 72 hours before each match. If it comes out negative they are allowed to receive their ticket," said Abdulwahab al-Musleh, sports affairs adviser to Qatar's health ministry. Social distancing, mask wearing and use of Qatar's contact tracing app and sanitizer will be mandatory, he added, during a media briefing in Doha. International fans will be unable to attend because of Qatar's virus mitigation measures, and there will be no public events including fan zones.

Qatar's coronavirus cases are steadily ticking up, with 59.5 new cases per 100,000 people in the past week, up 15 percent on the week before. The death rate is very low and cases remain fewer than many other countries in the region. "This slight increase means we won't raise the capacity beyond 30 percent," said Musleh who added the new variants of coronavirus are likely already in Qatar. Following a cluster of cases in the Saudi Al-Hilal team during the AFC Champions League at the end of last year, Musleh said that "several measures to prevent that recurring" had been taken.

On January 15 Auckland City withdrew from February's tournament, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and related quarantine measures required by the New Zealand authorities. FIFA said it would work with the Qatari authorities to provide "the safeguards required to protect the health and safety of everyone involved in the competition".

The February 4-11 Club World Cup 2020 will now be contested by Qatari club Al Duhail, Al Ahly of Egypt, Bayern Munich, Ulsan Hyundai, Tigres UANL and the winners of the CONMEBOL Libertadores final scheduled for January 30. The first round match will no longer take place and Al Duhail will begin the competition in the second round. The competition format remains otherwise unchanged. Matches will be held at Qatar's recently inaugurated Ahmad Bin Ali and Education City stadiums, important test fixtures ahead of the 2022 World Cup. — AFP



The winners of the first FIFA21 championship.



The winners with Kuwait Esports Club and GAMMA GAME officials.

Kuwait Esports Club hosts first FIFA21 championship

KUWAIT: The finals of the first FIFA21 championship were held recently in the presence of Kuwait Esports Club Chairman of the Board Abdullah Al-Ali and Secretary Faisal Abul. The championship was held at the GAMMA GAME hall in Salmiya, with participation of 64 players and 12 volunteer organizers. Kuwait Esports Club broadcasted the championship

live on its Twitch channel. The club invited young commentator Yazan Taha to attend the finals and he was presented with a plaque. Ahmad Salem Hameed and Khalid Abdelbasat Alsameer had qualified for the final match, and Hameed came out victorious. Hameed received a financial prize and membership in the Kuwait Esports Club.

putting his impressive record in front of goal as he prepares to face his old club in the last 16 of the Champions League next month.

Mbappe back in form

Mbappe was more prominent in this game, however, as he scored his first goals of the Pochettino era. Pochettino said: "I was already happy with Mbappe's performances before tonight. I am pleased that he scored because scoring goals is crucial for a striker's confidence. But we knew it was only a matter of time."

The France World Cup-winning star was scythed down just outside the box by Omlin in the 16th minute,

with the Swiss goalkeeper initially shown a yellow card before the punishment was upgraded to red following a VAR review. PSG made the extra man count as Di Maria played in Mbappe to open the scoring with a dinked finish over substitute goalkeeper Dimitry Bertaud in the 34th minute.

Pochettino lost goalkeeper Keylor Navas to injury at half-time, while captain Marquinhos was also forced off early in the second half. The coach later said he thought it was "nothing serious" for either player. Mbappe cut the ball back for Neymar to make it 2-0 on the hour mark, before Icardi tucked in his third goal in four games.—AFP



PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Kylian Mbappe (center) is tackled by Montpellier's Swiss goalkeeper Jonas Omlin (right) during the French L1 football match between Paris-Saint Germain (PSG) and Montpellier at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris on Friday. — AFP

Neymar on target on 100th PSG appearance

PARIS: Neymar made his 100th appearance for Paris Saint-Germain on Friday and marked the occasion with a goal in a 4-0 rout of 10-man Montpellier that took Mauricio Pochettino's side clear at the top of Ligue 1. Kylian Mbappe scored twice and Mauro Icardi was also on target with PSG leading 1-0 before netting three times in the space of four minutes around the hour mark.

The game, played behind closed doors at the Parc des Princes, was conditioned by the early sending-off of Montpellier goalkeeper Jonas Omlin for a foul on Mbappe, as PSG made the most of their extra man. It was their fourth straight win since drawing at Saint-Etienne in Pochettino's first match in charge after the Argentine was appointed as coach on January 2.

The former Tottenham Hotspur boss was back on the Paris bench having spent a week self-isolating following a positive Covid-19 test that forced him to miss his new team's 1-0 win at Angers last weekend. "I feel good. I am happy to be back," he said.

PSG are now three points clear of second-placed Lille, who go to in-form Rennes on Sunday. Lyon in third are five points behind the leaders before visiting derby rivals Saint-Etienne, who will be without seven players because of a coronavirus outbreak. The capital club's rivals may have their work cut out trying to overtake the reigning champions on this evidence, with the attacking quartet of Neymar, Mbappe, Icardi and Angel Di Maria running riot. Neymar's goal took his tally to 81 in 100 appearances for PSG since his world-record \$22 million-euro (\$264m) move from Barcelona in August 2017. His time in Paris has been marred by injuries at important moments but there can be no dis-

Live		Matches on TV (Local Timings)	
SPANISH LEAGUE			
Osasuna v Granada CF	beIN Sports	16:00	
Elche CF v FC Barcelona	beIN Sports HD 3	18:15	
Celta de Vigo v SD Eibar	beIN Sports	20:30	
Atletico de Madrid v Valencia C.F	beIN Sports HD 1	23:00	
ITALIAN CALCIO LEAGUE			
Juventus FC v Bologna FC	beIN Sports HD 1	14:30	
Genoa CFC v Cagliari Calcio	beIN Sports HD 5	17:00	
Hellas Verona FC v SSC Napoli	beIN Sports HD 4	17:00	
SS Lazio v US Sassuolo Calcio	beIN Sports HD 4	20:00	
Parma Calcio 1913 v UC Sampdoria	beIN Sports HD 4	22:45	
GERMAN BUNDESLIGA			
FC Schalke 04 v FC Bayern Munich	beIN Sports	17:30	
TSG 1899 Hoffenheim v FC Koln	beIN Sports	20:00	
FRENCH LEAGUE			
Bordeaux v Angers SCO	beIN Sports HD 6	15:00	
Stade Reims v Stade brestois 29	beIN Sports HD 9	17:00	
Nimes Olympique v Lorient	beIN Sports	17:00	
FCO Dijon v RC Strasbourg	beIN Sports HD 7	17:00	
FC Metz v FC Nantes	beIN Sports HD 6	17:00	
Stade Rennais v LOSC Lille	beIN Sports	19:00	
Saint Etienne v Olympique Lyonnais	beIN Sports	23:00	