

Paralympic flame ceremonies begin as virus surges in Japan

TOKYO: Japan held its first Paralympic flame-lighting ceremonies yesterday, with athletes waiting to learn whether spectators will be in the stands as the country battles a spike in virus cases. Fans were banned from almost all venues at the pandemic-postponed Tokyo Olympics, which ended Sunday, while athletes faced restrictions on movement and were tested daily.

The Paralympics are expected to take place under similar conditions when they begin on Aug 24, Japanese media said, with an official decision on spectators expected early next week. Although Japan has seen a comparatively small COVID-19 outbreak overall, with around 15,300 deaths, the latest wave driven by the more infectious Delta variant is pushing daily case numbers to new records.

Tokyo and five other regions are currently under a virus state of emergency, which bans bars and restaurants from serving alcohol and asks them to close by 8 pm. Instead of a traditional relay on public roads, "torch-kiss" Paralympic flame-lighting events will be held in towns and cities across Japan over the next week, with the flame transferred from torch to torch.

The flames will be brought to Tokyo and combined, but plans to have spectators line the route of a relay in the capital have been scrapped, a city government official told AFP. "We had planned to hold the Paralympic torch relay in Tokyo with some 700 torchbearers," said Tokyo Metropolitan Government official Koichi Osaka. "But because of the state of emergency, we decided not to do the relay on public roads."

The emergency measures are scheduled to last until the end of August. Similar "quasi-emergency" measures are in place in other regions where cases are rising. The remote city of Tono in Japan's northern Iwate region decided to open its Paralympic flame ceremony to the public, and was expecting a small crowd of around 50 people including officials. "We wanted to have a diverse group of people, young and old, non-Japanese nationals and those with disabilities, to take part in the event," the city official in charge of the ceremony told AFP. "We did not advertise the ceremony. We



RIKUZENTAKATA: Torchbearer Miu Takahashi lights a lantern during a flame-lighting ceremony for the upcoming Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games in Iwate prefecture yesterday. —AFP

will take thorough anti-infection measures, of course."

Around 4,000 Paralympians and 12,000 officials, staff and media from overseas will be in Japan for the Games. At the Tokyo Olympics, organizers reported 511 positive cases, mostly among residents, with one so-called "cluster", in the Greek artistic swim-

ming team. Olympics organizers have denied any connection to rising virus cases in Tokyo, although some experts argue that holding the Games undermined the government's messaging on virus risks. Around 35 percent of Japan's population are fully vaccinated, including more than 80 percent of the over 65s. — AFP

Swiss prosecutor wraps up grilling of ex-FIFA boss Blatter

GENEVA: A Swiss prosecutor yesterday concluded four days of final interviews with former FIFA president Sepp Blatter in a long-running probe into a suspected fraudulent payment in 2011. Former world football chief Blatter, 85, has met with a federal prosecutor every day since Monday for final hearings in a case that shook the sport. Blatter is being investigated over a two million Swiss franc (\$2.2 million) payment to Michel Platini, who was then in charge of European football's governing body UEFA.

The final hearings with a federal prosecutor from the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) of Switzerland took place in Zurich, where FIFA has its headquarters. Blatter was accompanied by his lawyer Lorenz Erni. "It's over. It was the last day," Blatter's spokesman Thomas Renggli told AFP after yesterday's fourth straight day of interviews. "At the end of the hearing, Mr Erni said now is the time to stop harassing Mr. Blatter. Now Mr Blatter is relieved. He's glad it's over. It was hard for him this week, mentally and physically."

'Disloyal payment'

Due to Blatter's fragile health, he could only stay at the hearing venue for a couple of hours maximum at a time. While 66-year-old Platini's final interview with the prosecutor was in March, Blatter's hearing was postponed to August due to the retired Swiss

football administrator's health. He spent two months in hospital in December and January after undergoing heart surgery.

Under the Swiss Code of Criminal Procedure, in lengthy and complex proceedings, suspects "are questioned one last time before the investigation is concluded", the OAG said in a statement ahead of the final hearings. Joseph "Sepp" Blatter joined FIFA in 1975, became its general secretary in 1981 and the president of world football's governing body in 1998.

He was forced to stand down in 2015 and was banned by FIFA for eight years, later reduced to six, over ethics breaches for authorizing what prosecutors termed a "disloyal payment" to Platini - in other words, one made in his own interests rather than FIFA's. "The criminal proceedings against Joseph Blatter are now being conducted on suspicion of fraud, breach of trust and unfaithful business management," the OAG statement said. "The criminal proceedings against Michel Platini are being conducted on suspicion of fraud, participation in breach of trust, participation in unfaithful management and false documents."

Decision time

The OAG said the presumption of innocence applied to all parties and it could not put a time frame on concluding the investigation. "Conducting final interviews does not allow any conclusions to be drawn about the outcome of criminal proceedings (discontinuation, penalty order or indictment)," it added. Renggli said a decision on an indictment or a dismissal could come within the next few weeks.

In a statement before this week's final hearings, Blatter insisted the payment to former France and Juventus attacking midfielder Platini, considered among world football's greatest-ever players,



ZURICH: Former president of world football's governing body FIFA Sepp Blatter leaves the building of the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland to attend a hearing in Zurich on Aug 9, 2021. — AFP

was above board. "It was based on an oral contract that regulated Platini's advisory activities for FIFA between 1998 and 2002," he said. "The payment was delayed because FIFA was initially unable to pay out the entire amount - and Platini only made the claim in 2010. The process was correctly declared as a late payment of wages, the social insurance was accounted for accordingly and finally approved by all responsible FIFA bodies." — AFP