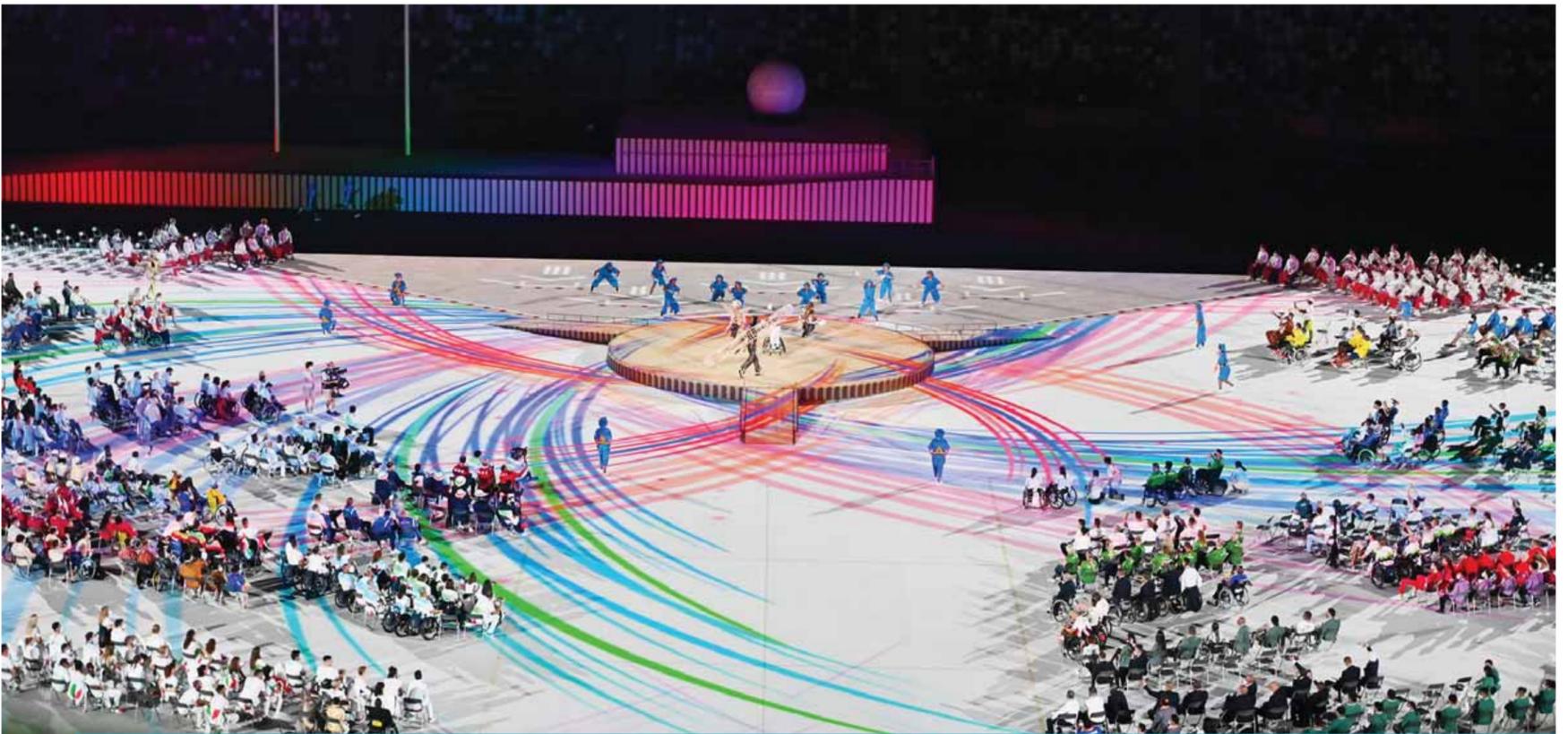


Tokyo Paralympics open after year's virus delay Emperor inaugurates event in near empty stadium as per virus rules



TOKYO: Performers and delegations take part in the opening ceremony for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games at the Olympic Stadium in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

TOKYO: Japan's emperor declared the Tokyo Paralympics open in a nearly empty stadium yesterday, with athletes ready to defy stereotypes and shatter records despite a year-long pandemic delay. Emperor Naruhito made the announcement surrounded by banks of vacant multicolored seats at Tokyo's 68,000-capacity Olympic Stadium, with virus rules banning spectators from almost all Games events.

"I declare open the 2020 Tokyo Paralympic Games," he said, wearing a

white surgical mask. The pared-down ceremony took place in front of around 800 VIPs and officials, but there was a celebratory mood as 162 teams enjoyed their long-awaited moment in the global spotlight. The ceremony took "We Have Wings" as its concept, creating a mini "airport" on the stadium field and telling the story of a one-winged plane that takes to the skies.

A reduced parade of roughly 3,400 Paralympians and team officials entered the stadium, wearing masks but waving and dancing after the disappointment of the postponement and worries about a potential cancellation.

A volunteer carried Afghanistan's flag into the stadium as a "sign of solidarity" with athletes from the country, which is one of 21 nations unable to compete at the Games. International Paralympic Committee president Andrew Parsons said the event could be a "platform for change."

"Many doubted this day would happen, many thought it impossible, but thanks to the efforts of many, the most transformative sports event on Earth is about to begin," he said, as a steady drizzle fell in the stadium. The 13-day Games, with 539 gold medals up for grabs across 22 sports, arrive two weeks after the close of an Olympics that also took place almost entirely behind closed doors over virus fears.

but the virus situation in Japan has worsened dramatically in recent weeks. The country has recorded more than 25,000 daily infections in the past week, and while the death toll remains comparatively small at around 15,500, just 40 percent of the population is fully vaccinated.

The opening ceremony came with Tokyo and 12 other regions under a virus state of emergency that largely limits the opening hours of bars and restaurants and bans them from selling alcohol. But several hundred people gathered outside the stadium before the ceremony started, hoping to taste the atmosphere despite being locked out.

"I know this is a difficult time, but the athletes came to Japan despite the risks," said 41-year-old Haruyo Yamamoto. "Since we're hosting the Games, I want them to perform at their best." A small handful of protesters also gathered outside the stadium, holding signs saying "No Paralympics" and shouting through megaphones.

'Blade Jumper'

On Tuesday afternoon, crowds gathered in parts of Tokyo to watch the Blue Impulse air display team fly over trailing smoke in the blue, red and green colors of the Paralympic symbol. But in a sign of the ongoing concerns, New Zealand's Paralympic team did not participate in the opening ceremony, though organizers said it was the only team to opt out.

Paralympic chiefs are hoping the mood



Andrew Parsons (front left), president of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), and Japan's Emperor Naruhito (center) wave as Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga (right) walks in at the start of the opening ceremony for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games at the Olympic Stadium in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

will shift when the sporting action begins on Wednesday, with over 4,400 athletes itching to get started. Among those competing are German long-jumper Markus Rehm, dubbed the 'Blade Jumper', who is aiming to break the 8.62 meter world record he set himself in June.

Japan's wheelchair tennis legend Shingo Kunieda will be aiming to excite home fans, while United States wheelchair racer Tatyana McFadden is hoping to add to her collection of 17 Paralympic medals. China

is expected to continue its long-running Paralympic gold medal dominance, but host Japan will be hoping its record 254-strong team can repeat the country's Olympic gold rush.

Badminton and taekwondo will make their Paralympic debuts in Tokyo. The Games will also put the spotlight on Japan's record of disability inclusion, with activists saying more remains to be done despite some progress, especially in Tokyo, on accessibility. — AFP



539 gold medals up for grabs

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Virus surge in Japan

Paralympic athletes will be subject to the same rules as their Olympic counterparts — including daily testing, mandatory mask-wearing and limits on their movement. The run-up to the Games has been fraught, with polling for months showing Japanese were opposed to hosting them this summer.

The mood seemed to shift once the Olympics got under way, with a majority saying they were glad it had gone ahead,

Will the Tokyo Paralympics bring change?

TOKYO: As the Paralympic Games begin, Japan's efforts to improve accessibility and inclusion are in the spotlight, with many arguing there is still plenty of work to do. Some 4,400 athletes with impairments will compete in Tokyo at the world's biggest parasports tournament.

It's a place for sporting history, but also an event organizers say can change attitudes towards people with disabilities. "It's a precious event," said Masaaki Suwa, a Japanese para-canoeist who missed the cut for the Tokyo Games but will be cheering for Japan's team on television.

"They are doing great things but they are not superhumans. I want people to know that they are human beings just like you," the 35-year-old told AFP. It's a bittersweet moment for Suwa, who had hoped to compete in his hometown, but he's counting on other Paralympians to make an impact on Japanese society.

"I hope (the Paralympics) will be a springboard that allows people to live more closely alongside disabled people," said Suwa, who uses a wheelchair. Disability rights experts and activists paint a mixed picture of the situation in Japan.

There has been progress on barrier-

free infrastructure, with officials calling accessibility important both for people with disabilities but also the country's large elderly population. A barrier-free enforcement law has been revised twice in recent years to promote accessibility at public facilities.

'Marginal' change

Particular efforts have been made in Tokyo's mammoth train system, with elevators operating at around 96 percent of stations as of 2019, the city government says. By 2019, 82 percent of Tokyo subway stations also had platform gates to keep visually impaired passengers and others safe — up from 56 percent in 2013.

New hotels with more than 50 rooms are also required to make at least one of every 100 barrier-free. "In terms of the number of barrier-free facilities, Japan appears advanced," said Miki Matheson, deputy chief of Japan's Paralympic delegation. But the three-time Paralympic gold medalist, who lives in Canada and is in Tokyo for the Games, says accessibility is not the same as inclusion. "I'm often treated as a disabled person when I'm back in Japan," said Matheson, who uses a wheel-

chair. "In Canada, I live without noticing my disability at all."

Activists say the workplace is an example of the barriers that remain. Under government rules, workers with disabilities must make up at least 2.3 percent of staff at all companies. Larger firms face fines for non-compliance.

In 2018, the government was forced to apologize for routinely overstating the number of disabled people on its staff to meet quotas. Motoaki Fujita, a sports sociology professor at Nihon Fukushi University and a parasports expert, says Japan has become more inclusive, "but the change is still marginal."

Some 57 percent of people surveyed by Fujita's team last year said they "certainly or somewhat" believe people with disabilities are weak and have difficulty living with non-disabled people. That's only slightly less than the 61 percent who felt the same in a 2014 poll.

Paralympic 'catalyst'

Tokyo's Paralympics will take place with almost no spectators because of virus rules, which some fear could blunt its impact on Japanese society. "The



TOKYO: This picture taken on Monday shows Japanese para-canoeist Masaaki Suwa commuting in a train station in Tokyo. — AFP

Paralympics is a very good chance to change people's thinking," said Shigeo Toda, head of a Tokyo-based research institute studying the lifestyles of people with disabilities.

"But we can't help but think that momentum could sag if people can't watch them in person," Toda said. Saki Takakuwa, a Paralympic runner who competes with a prosthetic blade, worries about the spectator ban's effect. "I know people will watch the Games on TV, but I wonder how they will respond," she told the Mainichi Shimbun daily.

"Compared to past Games, it's diffi-

cult for me to have hope that people will feel something", added the 29-year-old, who is contesting her third Paralympics. International Paralympic Committee President Andrew Parsons admits the spectator ban is "a challenge," but argues broadcasts will reach billions around the world.

"The Games themselves are a catalyst," he told AFP. "It's the moment when people see athletes in action, and that's when this change really occurs." In Japan, he added, there is "still a lot of progress to be made. But we believe that we have started to see a change." — AFP