

Tokyo Olympics organizers say Games on 'solid ground'

Bach says IOC 'committed', admits fans may be barred

TOKYO: Tokyo Olympics organizers said yesterday they were encouraged by the support of IOC chief Thomas Bach and felt on "solid ground" to hold the virus-postponed event, despite growing debate over its feasibility. International Olympic Committee head Bach briefed organizers in Tokyo on his discussions with other groups involved in this summer's Games, including athletes, Tokyo 2020 President Yoshiro Mori said.

"He confirmed everybody's intention, and there were no questioning voices or opposition from anyone or anywhere. Everybody had a strong feeling that they want to go to the Tokyo Games," Mori said. "We are still on solid ground and have been pushing in that direction. Bach gave us his strong stance, and we are thankful for that."

Bach said Wednesday that organizers were committed to holding the Tokyo Games safely this year, but admitted for the first time that fans may not be allowed to attend in person. Doubts have soared about the Games - due to start on July 23 - as the pandemic continues to paralyze many countries and with large parts of Japan, including Tokyo, under a state of emergency.

Tokyo's first Olympic test event this year, an

artistic swimming competition scheduled for March, was postponed on Thursday for two months because of travel restrictions. But despite falling public support in Japan, the United States, Australia and Canada have all backed the Games, as have several top athletes.

"One year ago, there was a certain mood. Now it's completely different. Many voices are being raised, wanting to go to Tokyo as soon as possible," said Tokyo 2020 CEO Toshiro Muto, who also spoke to Bach yesterday. "During the athletes' committee, there was an atmosphere - 'Even if there are various circumstances, let's make a new Olympics by themselves by overcoming the circumstances.' (Bach) told us that he was so moved," he said.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has also told the IOC that China will support the organization for the Games to go ahead, Muto added. Bach said on a visit to Tokyo in November that he was "very, very confident" of holding the Olympics in front of fans, but on Wednesday conceded that they would now take place behind closed doors. "This I cannot tell you," he said when asked if fans would be able to attend. "Our priority is to ensure safe Olympic Games." —AFP



TOKYO: Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games Organizing Committee (TOGOC) president Yoshiro Mori (left) and CEO Toshiro Muto speak to the media after their video conference with IOC president Thomas Bach yesterday. —AFP

Tennis stars eye freedom ahead of bumper week

MELBOURNE: The world's top tennis stars are set to emerge from a grueling two weeks stuck in their hotel rooms over coming days as they race to get match fit before their coronavirus-disrupted season resumes in Australia. Seventeen charter flights jettied the cream of the sport into Melbourne and Adelaide this month ahead of the delayed Australian Open, with everyone on board whisked into 14 days of mandatory quarantine.

The plan was to allow them five hours a day to practice outside, and many have enjoyed the privilege. But eight positive COVID-19 cases from the more than 1,000 players, coaches and officials who arrived in largely virus-free Australia threw preparations for others into disarray. Seventy-two players have been confined to their Melbourne rooms 24 hours a day, forced to strike balls against mattresses and exercise as best they can, sparking complaints about the tough conditions. But the ordeal is ending, with the first players expected to taste freedom on Thursday evening, and others let out gradually depending on when their flights touched down. A bumper six ATP and WTA tournaments await them beginning on Sunday, all at Melbourne Park and squeezed into a week to make up for lost time in the lead-up the season-opening Grand Slam on February 8.

Spanish great Rafael Nadal, who is gunning to win a 21st Slam title, moving him past the injured Roger Federer, said he felt "privileged" to play at all given the devastation wrought by the pandemic globally. "It's a different situation than usual, it's much more sad for everyone," he told CNN this week. —AFP

Yasir helps Pak foil South Africa fight in first Test

KARACHI: Pakistan's spinners Yasir Shah and Nauman Ali grabbed three wickets in the space of ten runs to halt South Africa's fightback on the third day of the first Test in Karachi yesterday. When it looked like South Africa would end the day at parity after wiping out Pakistan's big 158-run first innings lead, Yasir struck twice and Nauman once to leave the tourists on 187-4 at close.

Nightwatchman Keshav Maharaj was unbeaten on two and skipper Quinton de Kock was yet to score, as South Africa now lead by 29 runs with six second innings wickets in hand. Earlier, Pakistan scored 378 to take a crucial lead over South Africa's first innings total of 220. Opener Aiden Markram, who scored a polished 74 for his 8th fifty, added 127 for the second wickets with Rassie van der Dussen who scored a solid 64.

But Yasir, with figures of 3-53, changed the scenario by dismissing Dussen caught and then trapped Faf du Plessis leg-before for ten, while Nauman had Markram caught by a close-in fielder to trigger a three wicket collapse in 33 balls. Markram, dropped on 27 by Pakistan skipper Babar Azam off spinner Yasir, also had a leg-before decision overturned on four.

Dussen also had a leg-before decision overturned on 56. Markram hit ten boundaries and Dussen five. Both Yasir and Nauman will be major threats for South Africa on a fourth day National stadium pitch which produced 14 wickets on day one, four on the second and six on the third. South Africa were off to a confident start with Markram and Dean Elgar defying Pakistan's attack, and were 37 without loss at lunch.



KARACHI: Pakistan's Abid Ali tries to field the ball played by South Africa's Rassie van der Dussen during the third day of the first cricket Test match between Pakistan and South Africa at the National Stadium yesterday. —AFP

Elgar, in visible discomfort after being hit on the left hand by a rising delivery from pacer Shaheen Shah Afridi, was caught by diving wicketkeeper Mohammad Rizwan off Yasir for 29. In the morning Pakistan's tail added 70 runs to frustrate South Africa, who were looking for quick wickets.

South Africa's pace spearhead Kagiso Rabada bowled Hasan Ali for 21 to reach 200 wickets in his 44th Test. Rabada, 25, is the eighth South African to take 200 or more Test wickets. Pakistan were 323-9 at that point, but Yasir and Nauman added 55 valuable runs for the final wicket. Yasir, who scored a Test century in Australia in 2019, hit a six and four fours in his 38 not out, while debutant Nauman scored three boundaries before falling for 24. Rabada with 3-70 and spinner Maharaj, who took 3-90, were the pick of the South African bowlers. —AFP