

Sports

Kenya athletes stumbling over stalled stadium repairs

ITEN: Kenya hosts the world junior athletics championships in just over a year, hoping to showcase its future stars and the potential the country has to stage international athletics competitions. Athletes are training hard, but preparations for the event have stalled amid construction delays and the government's failure to deliver promised upgrades to sports facilities including new stadiums.

"Our athletes have suffered a lot," said Elias Kiptum Mahindi, a two-time winner of the Linz marathon in Austria, who has trained in the high-altitude town of Iten, the cradle of Kenyan champions, for the past decade. Iten, 2,400 meters (7,874 feet) above sea level, has been the training site for Olympic medal winners including David Rudisha, the former world marathon record holder Wilson Kipsang, and current women's marathon record holder Mary Keitany.

"The athletes really like the serenity Iten provides," Mahindi said. "The climate and the conditions here are very good." But ambitious plans to improve facilities have resulted in running tracks being closed for months and no sign of them reopening. "We are urging the national government and those responsible to help us," Mahindi said. When Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta was first elected in 2013, he listed nine stadiums to be built or refurbished. They included the famous Kamariny stadium in Iten, and the two big stadiums in Eldoret and Kapsabet, both named after Kenya's legendary athlete Kipchoge Keino. Six years later, none of the stadiums are ready.

Nowhere to run

In Iten, the Kamariny public training ground — a track that has launched the careers of multiple champions and driven

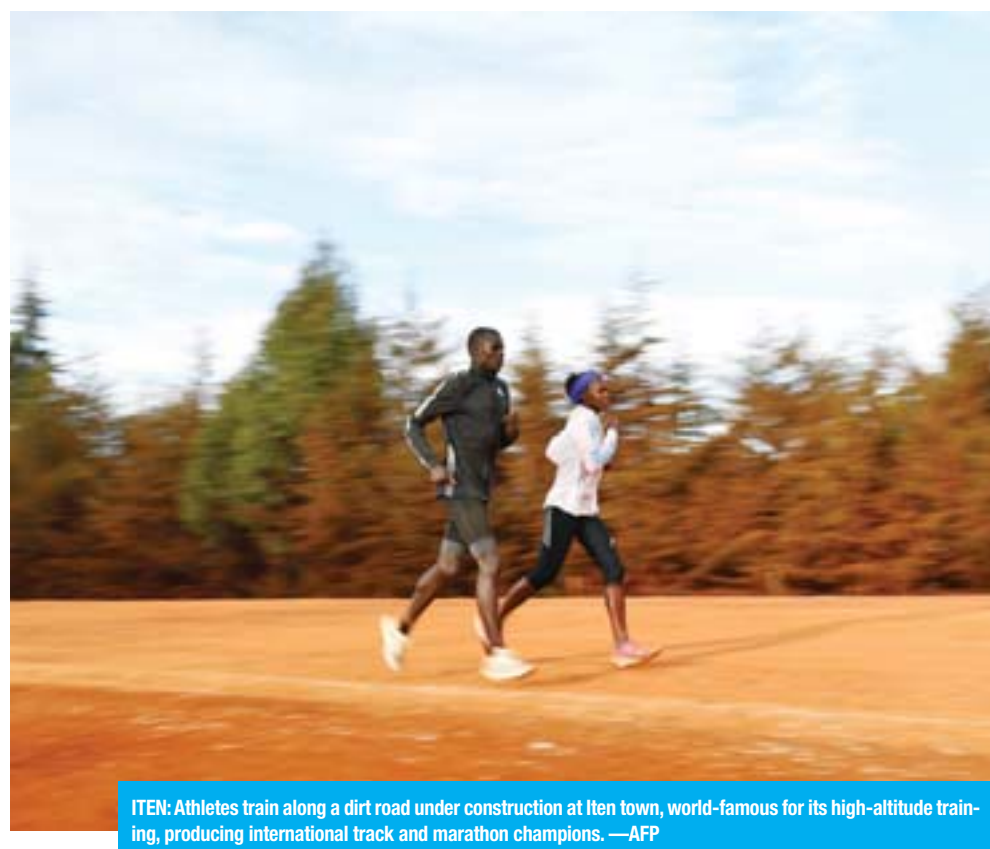
Kenya's dominance in middle and long distance running for over half a century — is closed. Athletes are forced to travel to running tracks in Eldoret, some 35 kilometers away, or in the neighboring town of Tambach, 11 kilometers away. Colm O'Connell, who left Ireland for Kenya's Rift Valley over 40 years ago and has coached over 20 Olympic and World champions, has been forced to hire a bus every day to take his junior athletes for training to Tambach.

"It has become very expensive," said O'Connell, noting that crowding is also a problem as runners from miles around converge on the limited facilities at Tambach. "Even when you reach there you're not assured of getting the space to train," he said. In Eldoret, the athletes have to join a waiting list for training at the small university track each morning and evening.

As the clock ticks down to next year's championships, athletes point out that delayed government plans to upgrade facilities risk damaging a sport that brings intense national pride to the country. "The tracks were supposed to be ready by now — so that at least we can use them to train and prepare all the teams," said athletics coach Kenneth Kibet. "It is a big problem for the whole country."

Fund-raising for own track

Among the projects is an expensive all-weather tartan running track at the iconic Kamariny stadium in Iten. There is little sign of progress: the stadium is closed and construction is stalled. Kibet said athletes would have preferred that the existing dirt track have been simply upgraded, so at least they would have somewhere to train. "We can't come here," Kibet said. "We would have preferred that this track be left as it is." Some fear that Kenya has



ITEN: Athletes train along a dirt road under construction at Iten town, world-famous for its high-altitude training, producing international track and marathon champions. —AFP

not learned its lessons from the past. Kenya lost the hosting rights for the football African Nations Championships (CHAN) in 2018. The overall governing body, the Confederation of African Football, ruled the country was not in a position to host the event since the stadiums were not ready in time.

The government insists, however, that it is doing what it can. Former sports minister Rashid Achesa toured the Eldoret and Kamariny stadiums in Iten in January and

called on the contractors to speed up their work. He said government money allocated for the stadium constructions had been diverted to other priorities and the government was seeking new funding sources.

Frustrated athletes have taken matters into their own hands and have launched a fund-raising campaign to build a basic track nearer to Iten. "Athletes have come together," Kibet said. "We don't need complex rooms, just the field to be upgraded." —AFP

Japan's sumos hit by whisker ban

TOKYO: Japanese sumo officials have introduced a crackdown on beards, calling them "indecent" and telling wrestlers they must look spick and span during competitions under strict, new rules on personal grooming. The draconian whisker ban is part of fresh regulations also barring tattoos and long nails, a sumo spokesman told AFP on Wednesday, as the authorities look to clean up the image of Japan's roly-poly sport.

"It was stipulated that items such as long nails, tattoos and beards grown out of an excessive wish for good luck shall be banned," said the spokesman for the Japan Sumo Association (JSA). Superstitious sumo wrestlers often decline to shave their beards during tournaments as they believe it brings them luck, but the sumo association has decided they will no longer tolerate such slovenliness. "Wrestlers must preserve their personal hygiene," JSA elder Oguruma told reporters after a board meeting. "Officials and referees will be on the lookout. The sumo ring is sacred and it's important spectators don't see anything unsightly." —AFP

Federer shies away from Superman tag

INDIAN WELLS: Roger Federer is still savoring his latest remarkable milestone, but the Swiss great says his 100th career title isn't a sign he's super-human. "The problem is, people always elevate the superstar athlete to like Superman status like we're super-human and all that stuff," Federer said Wednesday as he prepared for his next challenge at the Indian Wells Masters. "I don't see myself like that. Being perfect doesn't exist," Federer said. "Everybody has their flaws. So do I."

Federer, owner of a men's record 20 Grand Slam titles, reached the 100-title milestone with a ruthless 6-4, 6-4 dismantling of Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas in the Dubai Championship final last Sunday. Seeded fourth at Indian Wells, he'll launch his bid for a sixth title in the California Desert exactly one week later when he takes on either Peter Gojowczyk or Andreas Seppi in the second round. He could find himself taking on Swiss compatriot Stan Wawrinka, a three-time Grand Slam champion, in the third round in a quarter that also includes sixth-seeded Kei Nishikori of Japan.

"It is something incredible to see, how (often Federer)

plays at a high level and does not have many injuries," said Nishikori. "For sure, he works so much harder than everybody." Federer, 37, said he never envisioned winning 100 titles — becoming just the second player along with 109-time winner Jimmy Connors to hit triple digits. "It's an achievement that I never thought I was going to make and one I only started thinking about maybe in the last nine months or year or so, ever since maybe I got to 96 or 97," he said.

Federer's 99th trophy had come last October at his home event in Basel. He missed out on the century at the Paris Masters, the ATP Finals in London and then at Melbourne — failing to make the final at any of those events, but when he got there in Dubai there was no room for doubt. "First attempt in a finals it's nice to pass the hurdle and get to 100 rather than going to every single event from now on and going 'Is this going to be the week where you're going to reach 100?' and going 'Yeah, I hope so,'" he said.

"I think all the players would have gotten fed up with that too so I'm happy I got it out of the way. "What I like about it is that it's maybe also a little time to reflect on all these great moments and great titles that I've had," he said. "For me, they're all very important. Some were more important than others, some were nicer than others but at the end everyone has a special meaning for me." —AFP