

Sports

North Korea says will not go to Olympics over COVID fears

IOC yet to receive official application

SEOUL: North Korea will not attend this year's Tokyo Olympics because of the coronavirus pandemic, Pyongyang's sports ministry said, dashing Seoul's hopes of using the Games to restart talks with its nuclear-armed neighbor. The isolated North's participation in the last Winter Games, hosted by the South in Pyeongchang, was a catalyst in the diplomatic rapprochement of 2018.

Leader Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong attended as his envoy in a blaze of publicity, and the South's President Moon Jae-in seized the opportunity to broker talks between Pyongyang and Washington that led to a series of high-profile meetings between Kim and then US president Donald Trump.

But Pyongyang's announcement extinguishes the possibility that the postponed Tokyo Games, due to begin in July, could kick off a reset in the now deadlocked talks process. North Korea's Olympic Committee "decided not to participate in the 32nd Olympic Games in order to protect players from the world public health crisis caused by COVID-19", said the Sports in the DPR Korea website, run by the sports ministry in Pyongyang.

But analysts said other factors may have been at play. The announcement — dated Monday — reported a meeting of the national Olympic committee on March 25. The North's official KCNA news agency had previously carried a dispatch on the committee meeting, without mentioning the Olympic decision.

All International Olympic Committee member countries are required to take part in each Games under the Olympic charter. An IOC spokesperson told AFP that it had "not received any official application from the NOC of DPRK to be released from their obligation". The spokesperson added that "despite several requests" the North's Olympic Committee had been unable to hold a conference

call to discuss the coronavirus situation.

Border lockdown

Pyongyang is more isolated than ever after imposing a strict border closure more than a year ago to protect itself from the virus that first emerged in neighboring China. While the North insists it has had no coronavirus cases — although experts doubt the assertion — the lockdown has exacerbated the economic pain from multiple international sanctions over its banned weapons programs. The new US administration of Joe Biden is in the final stages of a review of North Korea policy, with officials widely expected to support a resumption of lower-level talks rather than high-stakes, high-drama summits.

On the campaign trail, Biden characterized Kim as a "thug" and has sharply criticized Trump's meetings, saying he legitimized one of the world's most ruthless leaders, but has also said he is open to diplomacy. Biden recently warned North Korea of consequences for violations of UN Security Council resolutions after Pyongyang tested what US officials judged to be ballistic missiles.

'Shameless distortion'

Inter-Korean relations are also at a standstill, with the North repeatedly saying it has no interest in talking to Seoul, and last year blowing up a liaison office on its side of the border. Even so, Moon in his Independence Day speech on March 1 said: "This year's Tokyo Olympics could be an opportunity for dialogues between South Korea and Japan, the North and the South, North Korea and Japan, and North Korea and the US."

The day commemorates mass protests that took place in 1919 across the Korean peninsula against Tokyo's colonial rule. Seoul's unification ministry said



SEOUL: People watch a television screen showing a news report about North Korea's decision not to participate in the Tokyo Olympics due to the COVID-19 pandemic, at a railway station in Seoul yesterday. — AFP

it was "sorry that the COVID situation" had prevented the Games from serving as "an opportunity to advance peace on the Korean peninsula".

Japan's chief government spokesman Katsunobu Kato said it was monitoring the reports and authorities were seeking to improve the environment, "including infection countermeasures, so that many countries and regions can participate in the

Tokyo Games".

Analysts said the virus may not be the only reason behind Pyongyang's decision. "Pyongyang seems to be protesting against Japan's policies on North Korea, as sensitive issues such as human rights and sanctions have been raised by Tokyo, along with the US," Yang Moo-jin, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, told AFP. — AFP

Baylor Bears dominate Gonzaga to win NCAA crown

LOS ANGELES: The Baylor Bears ended the Gonzaga Bulldogs' quest for an unbeaten NCAA championship season on Monday, clinching the US college basketball title with a 86-70 victory. The Waco, Texas-based Baylor University team sealed their first ever "March Madness" title with a dominant performance against the Bulldogs, who were aiming to crown an undefeated season with a championship.

Monday's defeat at Indianapolis's Lucas Oil Stadium came just two days after Gonzaga's exhilarating semi-final victory over UCLA on Saturday, when Jalen Suggs' buzzer-beater sealed a 93-90 win. For long periods on Monday, it looked as if Gonzaga were still nursing a hangover from that win, with Baylor dominating in all departments to build a comfortable lead well before the end.

Jared Butler led the Baylor scoring with 22 points, seven assists and three rebounds, while MaCio Teague had 19 points with two rebounds. Baylor laid the foundations for success with a blistering start, jumping into a 9-0 lead that they never relinquished. The Bears had surged into a 19-point lead midway through the first half and also led by 20 points at one stage in the second. Baylor Bears coach Scott Drew said the fast start reflected his team's "culture of joy."

"They came out and fed off of each other and got off to a great start, and defensively we're pretty good," Drew said. "Our guys have been motivated



INDIANAPOLIS: The Baylor Bears celebrate with the trophy after defeating the Gonzaga Bulldogs 86-70 in the National Championship game of the 2021 NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament at Lucas Oil Stadium on Monday in Indianapolis, Indiana. — AFP

all year. It's a player-led team. We're so blessed to have unbelievable leadership. We play with a culture of joy. If you're going to war and I'm coaching, then I'm taking these guys."

Gonzaga, meanwhile, were left shattered in defeat, with Saturday's hero Suggs — who led the Bulldogs' scoring with 22 points — in tears. "We just couldn't get anything going, you have to give credit to Baylor," said Gonzaga coach Mark Few. "They were just so aggressive defensively we

couldn't get anything going on the offensive end. Hats off to them. They dominated both ends of the ball all night." Few had words of solace for his players, who had won 31 straight games this season by an average of 22.4 points. "You can't go 31-0 and get to the last night and get beat and feel bad about it," Few said. "It was an unbelievable run we've been on. I just said to them this will pass, and they've got to remember what an amazing accomplishment it was just getting to this point." — AFP

MLB: Full house for Rangers opener after restrictions lifted

HOUSTON: The Texas Rangers played out their home opener to a packed house on Monday, the largest crowd at a US sporting event since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. A near-capacity crowd of around 40,000 fans crammed into the baseball club's Globe Life Field for the game against the Toronto Blue Jays.

The decision to allow a capacity crowd at the game followed Texas Governor Greg Abbott's order last month to fully reopen the state. US President Joe Biden last week criticized the decision to allow a full house at Monday's game saying the Rangers were not being "responsible."

"That's a decision they made. I think it's a mistake," Biden said in an interview with ESPN. "They should listen to Dr [Anthony] Fauci, the scientists and the experts. But I think it's not responsible." Although the coronavirus situation is improving across the United States with steep declines in infection rates and millions being vaccinated every day, most sporting venues are still operating at reduced capacity.

The 40,300-capacity Globe Life Field staged last year's World Series between the Los Angeles Dodgers and Tampa Bay Rays, allowing around 11,400 fans into the stadium. In announcing plans to welcome a capacity crowd last month, Rangers

officials detailed a series of safety protocols which included fans being required to wear masks at all times except when eating and drinking.

However photos and footage from

Monday's game in Arlington showed swathes of fans ignoring the mask mandate, either by wearing a mask incorrectly or in many cases, not at all. Texas leader Abbott meanwhile snubbed an invitation to throw the first ceremonial pitch at Monday's game in protest against Major League Baseball's decision last week to withdraw this year's All Star Game from Atlanta over Georgia's new vot-

ing rights legislation.

"It is shameful that America's pastime is not only being influenced by partisan political politics, but also perpetuating false political narratives," Abbott said. Critics of the Georgia law say it will make voting harder for minorities in the state, which delivered a stunning victory to US President Biden in the 2020 election. — AFP



ARLINGTON: A view as the Texas Rangers take on the Toronto Blue Jays in the top of the fourth inning on Opening Day at Globe Life Field on Monday in Arlington, Texas. — AFP



DALLAS: Luka Dončić of the Dallas Mavericks shoots a fadeaway jump shot in the first quarter against the Utah Jazz at American Airlines Center on Monday in Dallas, Texas. — AFP

Doncic leads Mavs over Jazz

LOS ANGELES: Luka Dončić scored 31 points as the Dallas Mavericks shrugged off the injury absence of Kristaps Porziņģis to snap Utah's nine-game winning streak on Monday. Slovenian star Dončić spearheaded a superb offensive performance for the Mavs in a dominant 111-103 victory over the Western Conference leaders, who had been chasing a 10th straight win.

Dončić's tally included six three-pointers, while the 22-year-old prodigy also hauled down nine rebounds with eight assists. It was a hugely impressive fifth consecutive victory for the Mavs, who improved to 28-21 to remain in seventh place in the West.

Dallas had been jolted by confirmation just hours before tip-off that Porziņģis would miss Monday's game with a sprained right wrist. But the Mavs made light of the reshuffle with Dorian Finney-Smith weighing in with 23 points — including five from outside the arc — and Jalen Brunson adding 20 off the bench. Josh Richardson finished with 17 points and Tim Hardaway Jr 16 points.

Dallas steadily took control after edging into a 27-25 lead at the end of the first quarter, and pulled away decisively by outscoring the Jazz 37-27 in the third period. Mavs coach Rick Carlisle said his team had been determined to ask more questions of Utah after suffering a 120-101 defeat to the Western Conference pace-setters in January. "The difference was we came out and were much more physical than the last time we played them," Carlisle said. "That was light years ago. We knew we had to play with a lot more presence tonight."

Carlisle singled out the performance of Finney-Smith, who is back at full fitness after missing nine games earlier this season after testing positive for COVID-19. "He's such an important part of our team. We needed his defense, his rebounding and his scoring. He did everything tonight," Carlisle said. Utah, who owns the league's best record with 38 wins against 12 defeats, saw star playmaker Donovan Mitchell effectively bottled up for long periods. Mitchell finished with 16 points and four assists. Mike Conley led the Utah scorers with 28 points, while Bojan Bogdanovic and Jordan Clarkson had 16 apiece off the bench. — AFP