

The Japanese Public Wants Out of the Olympics. Everyone Else Says No.

Some two months away, organizers of the Tokyo Games face mounting pressure to postpone yet again.

More than 15,000 athletes from over 200 countries are expected to make their way to Japan in time for the Olympics starting July 24.

But as the date nears, pressures on the host country to postpone the Tokyo Games for a second time are mounting after it was initially delayed in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While precautions are in place, coronavirus cases continue to rise in Japan, which is also struggling to ramp up vaccinations. International spectators will be barred from traveling to the Games.

While the final say and planning rests with Olympic organizers and the Japanese government, here's what major stakeholders have to say.

The International Olympic Committee

Full steam ahead, more or less. In the words of International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Thomas Bach in January: "We're not losing time or energy on speculation about whether the Olympics are taking place," he said at a press conference.

"Our job is to organize the Olympics, not cancel it. We're working on how the games will take place."

"Our job is to organize the Olympics, not cancel it." — IOC chairman Thomas Bach.

To date, the committee has released an official "playbook of rules" that includes

guidelines on safety and has promised to maintain a “safe travel bubble” with the thousands of athletes, their entourages as well as journalists covering the games. It’s also in discussions to secure vaccine donations for Olympic athletes.

Bach more recently reaffirmed that “safety over packed stadiums came first”, as well as voiced his support for medical operations, jabs for athletes, and the strict implementation of “COVID counter-measures” in Olympic villages and all venues. “We are fully committed to the successful and safe delivery of the Olympic and Paralympic Games,” he said.

But how that will play out in reality remains to be seen. Officials have already confirmed a positive case involving a coach who entered Japan and tested positive upon arrival at the airport in Tokyo.

The Japanese public

Much of Japan is fiercely against holding the Olympics during the pandemic — and understandably so. The country is seeing a rapid rise in daily coronavirus cases.

A new survey showed that 83% of Japanese citizens polled did not want the Olympic games to go ahead in July. It was roughly split between those who wanted it cancelled outright or just postponed again, but the percentages for both were higher than in previous polls.

One public petition calling for the Olympics to be cancelled also drew more than 350,000 signatures.

Japan has extended its state of emergency. But with its slow vaccination rate, the lowest among the world’s wealthiest nations, the country is struggling to contain a new surge.

Japan’s Government

The government wants the Olympics to proceed. The Tokyo Games are already the most expensive in history, costing an estimated \$15.4 billion to stage. The year-long delay added to the financial burden.

“The Tokyo Olympics are operating in a very tough environment,” Toshiro Muto, CEO of the organizing committee, was quoted as saying in an *Associated Press* report when asked about the record costs.

He also revealed that costs had increased for the opening and closing ceremonies and said that the event should be looked at as “an investment rather than a cost”.

In a column published by *Channel News Asia*, sports commentator John Duerden said that the financial costs to the Japanese government were a huge factor to its final decision.

“Cancelling the Olympic Games would see Japan losing out financially. Such a loss, as the Japanese economy reels from a pandemic-caused slowdown could [also] be politically damaging,” Duerden noted. “It is understandable that there’s been a reluctance to cancel the Olympics unless absolutely necessary.”

Like the IOC, Japanese government officials have vowed to ensure a safe and secure Olympics.

But earlier this month, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga appeared to acknowledge the growing pressure, saying he has never “put the Olympics first” and that it was up to the IOC, with Japan responsible for ensuring safety measures.

Doctors and medical experts

The Tokyo Medical Practitioners Association wants the games canceled, *Reuters* reported. The top medical organization, which represents thousands of doctors, shared an open letter with Prime Minister Suga on its website this week, saying it “strongly requests” the authorities to cancel the games. The group warned that hospitals in Tokyo were also overwhelmed with coronavirus cases.

“Medical institutions dealing with COVID-19 patients have their hands full and have almost no spare capacity,” it said.

It added that Japan would have to bear the maximum responsibility for any superclusters that emerged as a result of the Olympics.

The Olympic athletes

None other than Japan's biggest sports star, tennis champion Naomi Osaka, voiced alarm over going ahead with the Games. Osaka told *BBC Sport* that the coronavirus cases in Japan "were a big concern" for her and she wasn't really sure if the Games should proceed.

"I'm an athlete, and of course my immediate thought is that I want to play in the Olympics," she said. "But as a human, I would say we're in a pandemic, and if people aren't healthy, and if they're not feeling safe, then it's definitely a really big cause for concern."

But Swiss tennis great Roger Federer, who is seeking his first Olympic gold in singles after missing the 2016 Rio Games due to a knee injury, was looking forward to Tokyo. "This is for me the big one," he was quoted as saying.

Others said that the world could use the international spectacle that the Games provides as a much-needed breather from the deprivation brought on by more than a year of the pandemic.

"I think the whole world really needs this Olympics, maybe more than anything else, due to the difficulties in the past year and a half," Jonathan Groth, a Danish table tennis player who competed in the 2016 Rio Games, previously told VICE World News. "We need to come together for one event and have something to focus on together."

Follow Heather Chen on Twitter.

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