

Tokyo Olympics: poll shows 60% of Japanese people want Games cancelled

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Preparations for the Tokyo Olympics have suffered another setback after a poll found that nearly 60% of people in Japan want them to be cancelled, less than three months before the Games are due to open.

Japan has extended a state of emergency in Tokyo and several other regions until the end of May as it struggles to contain a surge in Covid-19 cases fuelled by new, more contagious variants, with medical staff warning that health services in some areas are on the verge of collapse.

The Olympics, which were delayed by a year due to the pandemic, are set to open on 23 July, with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and organisers insisting that measures will be put in place to ensure the safety of athletes and other visitors, as well as a nervous Japanese public.

The survey, conducted between 7 and 9 May by the conservative Yomiuri Shimbun, showed 59% wanted the Games cancelled as opposed to 39% who said they should be held. “Postponement” – an option ruled out by the IOC – was not offered as a choice.

Of those who said the Olympics should go ahead, 23% said they should take place without spectators. Foreign spectators have been banned but a final decision on domestic attendance will be made in June.

Another poll conducted at the weekend by TBS News found 65% wanted the Games cancelled or postponed again, with 37% voting to scrap the event altogether and 28% calling for another delay. A similar poll in April conducted by Kyodo news agency found 70% wanted the Olympics cancelled or postponed.

As public opposition holds firm just over 70 days before the opening ceremony, the IOC and the Japanese government appear to be sending mixed messages over who is ultimately responsible for deciding the Games’ fate.

The IOC’s vice president, John Coates, said on Saturday that while Japanese sentiment about the Games “was a concern”, he could foresee no scenario under which the sporting extravaganza would not go ahead.

“The prime minister of Japan said that to the president of the United States two or three weeks ago. He continues to say that to the IOC,” Coates said.

But on Monday, Japan’s prime minister, Yoshihide Suga, said the IOC would have the final say, insisting that his government had not prioritised the Games over public health.

Asked in a parliamentary committee meeting whether the Games will continue even if Covid-19 infections spike, Suga replied: “I’ve never put the Olympics first”.

He added: “My priority has been to protect the lives and health of the Japanese population. We must first prevent the spread of the virus.”

Suga has repeatedly vowed to go ahead with the Olympics despite the spike in Covid-19 cases, but the TBS survey found his support rate at 40%, close to record lows marked earlier this year.

A visit to Japan by the IOC president, Thomas Bach, originally expected to take place next week, is being arranged for June, Fuji News Network reported on Monday, citing multiple unidentified sources.

Japanese media had reported that Bach would take part in a torch relay event in Hiroshima on 17 May, but Tokyo 2020 organisers said the visit had not been confirmed. A prerequisite for his visit would be the lifting of Japan's targeted states of emergency, the broadcaster said.

While no prominent athlete has publicly opposed the Games being held this summer, the Japanese tennis star Naomi Osaka said the time had come to discuss the merits of holding the event in the middle of a pandemic.

The world No 2 said staging the Games should be discussed as long as the issue was "making people very uncomfortable".

"Of course I want the Olympics to happen, but I think there's so much important stuff going on, especially the past year," she told a news conference ahead of the Italian Open.

"A lot of unexpected things have happened. For me, I feel like if it's putting people at risk ... then it definitely should be a discussion, which I think it is as of right now. At the end of the day I'm just an athlete, and there is a whole pandemic going on, so, yeah."

The virus has brought disruption to the torch relay and to qualifying events. Last week, Gymnastics Canada said it would not be sending a team to a last-chance Olympic qualifier in Rio de Janeiro in June over coronavirus concerns, effectively denying men's artistic, women's artistic, and rhythmic gymnasts the chance to compete in Tokyo.

Japan has recorded more than 600,000 coronavirus cases and more than 10,500 deaths – the highest in east Asia. On Saturday, it reported more than 7,000 infections – the highest since January.

In addition, only about 2% of Japan's 126m people have received at least one vaccine dose since its rollout began in mid-February, while hospitals are struggling to secure beds for newly diagnosed people.

A hospital in Tachikawa, western Tokyo, is displaying a banner warning that medical capacity had reached its limit. "Give us a break! The Olympics are impossible!" it says.

In Osaka prefecture, which has seen a surge in cases, more than 13,000 people diagnosed with Covid-19 have been asked to stay at home as hospitals are full, according to health ministry data.