

Tokyo Olympics

Tokyo's troubled Olympics offers taste of problems to come

Organisers of future events must learn to factor in extreme weather and Covid-19



Cautious welcome: US swimming team members arrive for the Tokyo Games © AFP via Getty Images

Leo Lewis JULY 23 2021

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After record-breaking rainfall, and with just three weeks to go before the opening ceremony of the [Tokyo Olympics](#), Japan watched in horror as entire buildings were washed down the hillsides of the popular tourist town of Atami.

The landslides, which claimed 18 lives and left 10 missing as they swept through residential streets, took place about an hour's drive outside the Japanese capital. And the ruined town is just a few kilometres from the mountain bike course where Olympians will compete next week.

The Atami deluge came during a fortnight when hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated from their homes as rainfall records were broken in eight of Japan's 47 prefectures, including Tokyo.

Now, Japanese climate change experts say the time has come for more resources to be channelled into improving forecasting, and for sporting events to be organised around the increasing likelihood of extreme weather. Tokyo's Olympics, in this light, may be a turning point for interactions between large-scale event planning and the effects of climate change.



Aftermath: a soldier looks at the wreckage left by a landslide in Atami earlier this month © AFP via Getty Images

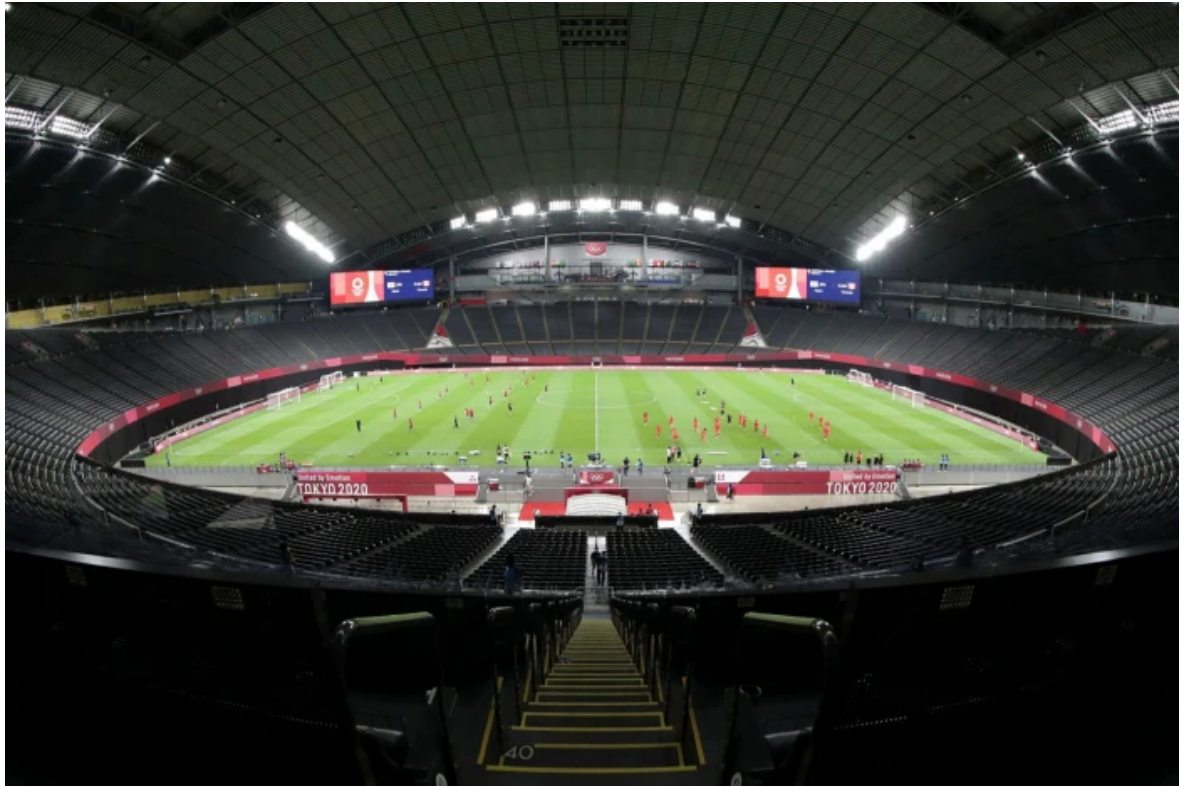
“My impression is that, even now, event planners do not take enough notice of the risk of extreme weather events, but will have to start to do so,” says Yu Kosaka, a climate change specialist at the University of Tokyo’s Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology. She predicts that heatwaves and torrential downpours will become more common.

Although research may give Japanese forecasters a better grasp of the likelihood of such catastrophes, Kosaka says, big sports events should start building more flexibility into their location and timing as a matter of course.

Changes of plan

Even before the deluge of July 2021, the Tokyo Olympics had become a powerful symbol of how human plans — even those as big, expensive and grandiose as the Olympic Games — are vulnerable to nature.

In November 2019, despite claiming in its bid documents that Tokyo in July was “mild”, Olympic organisers reluctantly moved the showcase marathon from Tokyo to the cooler city of Sapporo in the far north.



Spectatorless sport: the Japanese and Canadian women's football teams warm up for an Olympic match in Sapporo © Asano Ikko/AFP via Getty Images

The much-debated decision followed the temperature in central Tokyo hitting its highest ever recorded level in the previous July and doctors warning about the consequences for runners.

That was a significant compromise, but it was eclipsed by the decision in March 2020 to postpone the Games as the world confronted a pandemic for which, at the time, it saw no end.

The Japanese government's decision this year to press ahead with the Games is not popular. More than 50,000 athletes, coaches, officials and support staff will descend on Japan at a time when it has double-vaccinated only a small percentage of its population against Covid-19 and infections in Tokyo continue to rise.

Further compromises have also been necessary to keep the Games viable. These include decisions to bar spectators from almost all events, to hold the final stages of the torch relay off public roads, and to make athletes and teams submit to tight restrictions and constant infection testing.

Expect the unexpected

Medical experts say that planners of the Olympics and other mass sporting events need to view the hosting of the Tokyo games in the correct perspective: not as a one-off triumph of determination, but simply the first of many organisational challenges in a Covid era that could last for years.

“It depends on the size of the mass gatherings but such events will, in the future, all have to be held with consideration of infection control and the risk of disease outbreak,” warns Yasutaka Mizuno, who is a director of Tokyo’s Global Healthcare Clinic and an expert in epidemics.

In an interview with the FT, the president of the International Olympic Committee, [Thomas Bach](#), described the Tokyo Games as the “most complex and difficult ever”, because there is no blueprint for ensuring the safety of athletes.

“When we decided about the postponement, I’m happy now with hindsight that we did not know how difficult it would be — because, then, we may have had second thoughts,” he said.

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But even if or when the pandemic subsides, such complexity will be the norm for such events, says Hisashi Nakamura, deputy director at Japan’s Climate Science Research Laboratory at the University of Tokyo.

Consideration of global warming and its many potential effects will have to be treated as standard elements in the planning process.

More computing power, Nakamura argues, must be thrown into forecasting models in order to boost their resolution and to help maximise organisers’ preparedness.

“As we have seen, planners need to see extreme events coming,” he says.

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