

ORIPARA - Japan’s Olympic and Paralympic Summer Games and Beyond

Gavan McCormack

Five and a half months ago (15 March), I wrote of the “[Troubled Games of the XXXII Olympiad](#)” in the context of the dual crises facing Japan: continuing, unresolved radiation emanating from the 2011 Fukushima quake/tsunami/meltdown and the COVID-19 public health crisis. The Games were supposed to resolve these crises, leading the world into a new era of recovery, hope and peace, but as they went ahead in July and August neither was even mitigated.

The “Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games” were held over 17 summer days in 2021 ending on 8 August, and then followed by the “Tokyo 2020 International Paralympic Games” that opened in Tokyo on 24 August. My March essay addressed primarily the former. This sequel looks back at those recently completed Games and their Paralympic follow-up, currently (late August) underway in and around Tokyo.

Apart from being odd as actually occurring in 2021, the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games were remarkable in several respects. They were held in defiance of strong (70 to 80 per cent in a series of opinion surveys) national opinion that demanded full attention be paid to battling the COVID pandemic rather than to a grand Olympic circus. As the Japanese medal tally grew, the opposition weakened but the fact remains that the Games were an imposition enforced from above by bureaucrats, politicians, corporate sponsors and the “international Olympic movement”. Because Japan’s anti-Olympic citizens were unable to sway either their own government or the international community, the Games were held but in a bubble of isolation designed to block contact between athletes and the Japanese people. Overseas visitors were excluded. Athletes, their coaches, managers, and media representatives were under strict supervision and control, not allowed anywhere but their hotel and the stadium, and forbidden to cheer, sing, or shout. Despite the unpromising conditions the Games were pronounced a “success,” given saturation media around the world, medals celebrated, and the overall Japanese hosting treated as a triumph. Just over two weeks later came the Paralympics, at their height now in late August.

As the days and weeks pass since that first phase Olympic event, however, it becomes clear that Japan has paid, and will continue to pay, a high price. For its boldness in trying to conduct a major international event while in the grip of the pandemic, the country faces a growing public health crisis. At the outset of the pandemic, on 27 February 2020, when then



Japanese Prime Minister Abe (Shinzo) issued a “request” (tantamount to an order) for closure of the nation’s schools, there were just 210 infected people nationwide (and in Tokyo that day just one). Over the eighteen months that followed, Japan’s COVID infection rate grew by around one hundred times, so that it came to be recording around 25,000 daily cases of COVID (as of late August 2021), and in Tokyo alone around 5,000.

Over the year and a half battle against the virus, COVID infection proceeded in waves, each rising higher than the one before and capped with higher degree of its toxic Delta variant. To 28 August, Japan had recorded 1.4 million positive cases of COVID-19 infection, and 15,851 deaths from the pandemic. But, although people are urged to get vaccinated, stay at home and maintain social distancing, less than half the population had been fully vaccinated and other restrictions were commonly flouted. Tokyo and other cities teemed with movement and for the most part people ignored the supposed restrictions of the emergency or quasi-emergency. The current wave, officially “Phase 4,” an explosive spreading, commencing during the Olympics, continued to rise through the Paralympics, surpassing by more than three times all previous peaks and doubling just in the recent interval between the two Games. Experts are sure that the real figure of infections is far above this nominal one. Privatization and neo-liberal shrinkage of the public sector health system has starved Japan’s public hospital system and had the effect of restricting hospital admission to severe cases. Not uncommonly, ambulances ferry ill citizens around major cities for hours seeking a hospital, only in many cases to be forced to return those suffering from the virus to their home for unaided “recuperation.” Asahi Shimbun (21 August) reported that the official hospitalization rate of infected people was just 9.5 per cent. By that stage, at least 74,013 sick people were at home, hoping to endure and recover without

hospital attention.¹

In such circumstances, the “Tokyo 2020 International Paralympic Games,” opened on 24 August 2021 and was scheduled to continue to 5 September. Despite the “no spectators” rule, and the drastic policing and surveillance system, around 16,000 visitors, including 4,000 athletes themselves who suffer various forms of physical disability, arrived in the capital. They were to contest 539 events in 22 sports.

Japanese hosting of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games was widely criticized for multiple reasons. Not least was their fabulous cost. Much would have to be met by the people of Japan. When Japan first sought, and then was awarded them, the Games were to be “compact,” with an initial budget estimate of 700 million yen (ca \$6.3 billion). That figure in due course doubled and then quadrupled, reaching 2.7 trillion yen (around \$30 billion) and, if ancillary costs such as those borne by Tokyo metropolis are included, 3.5 trillion yen (\$32 billion). For rough comparison, Sydney’s 2000 Games cost around \$6.5 billion, Athens in 2004 a little under \$11 billion, London in 2012 \$14.8 billion.

The greatest objection to Japanese hosting of the Games, however, was not to the cost but to the diversion of attention from the struggle against the pandemic due to the grand events of the Games, allowing the virus to grow explosively (precisely as in due course happened). That same consideration applied to the Paralympic Games. Both were criticized for their incompatibility with the “stay at home” and the “three avoidances” of anti-pandemic policy. The government was hard put to defend itself against the charge of prioritising the Olympics over public health.

However, interest in and support for the Paralympic phase of the Games raised other issues to do with the human rights of the handicapped. Their cause attracted considerable attention in Japan leading up to

and through the events. For the Japan tending hitherto to be known rather as part of the problem of discrimination against the disabled than for any positive steps to combat it, the official commitment to the advancement of the rights of the disabled (according to the IPC perhaps as many as 15 per cent of global population), and to the outlawing of discrimination and the promotion of barrier-free policies of inclusiveness and diversity, was surely to be welcomed.

While the Paralympics could thus be defended on grounds significantly different from the Olympic Games, however, the adoption for the disabled of able-bodied criteria of “faster, further, longer, higher” was problematic. Some major figures in Japan’s civil society even saw in the Olympic and Paralympic promotion movements as signs of the recrudescence of pre-war eugenics.² Such criticism, and the pleas for cancellation, passed for the most part unreported in countries sending teams to Tokyo.

As the Olympic and Paralympic Games proceeded through the summer of 2021, the virus rampaged through the country. Its impact was markedly different from region to region and the island prefecture of Okinawa was particularly hard-hit. Okinawa’s vulnerability to the virus followed from its dependence on tourism (which suffered heavily under the impact of COVID restrictions) and its heavily US military base dependence (70 per cent of US military facilities in Japan, including major groups of US Air Force and Marine Corps, being concentrated on Okinawa’s islands). During the 18 month-long COVID-19 crisis 2,016 of those roughly 26,000 US military personnel became infected. How many of the total of Okinawan people infected should be attributed to contact with the US personnel cannot be known but since many Okinawans are employed in the bases it cannot be trivial.

With its relatively small population (1.4 million)

Okinawa’s infection numbers rose steadily, from less than 100 at the beginning of the summer to 761 by 18-August and 655 by the end of the month. Asahi Shimbun reported that in comparative terms that meant 310 infections per 100,000 of Okinawan population, the highest ratio in the country and well above second-place Tokyo (227).³ If Okinawa were a country, it would rank among the most serious concentrations of COVID infection, above the “worst” cases internationally such as, at that time, Malaysia (403 per 100,000). Even within Okinawa the imbalance was pronounced. The outlying island of Miyakojima (population: 55,000) recorded an August 2021 infection rate of 445 per 100,000, one and a half times that for Okinawa prefecture as a whole and nearly double the national figure.⁴ As people were urged to stay at home, while US service personnel moved in and out of the prefecture freely, Okinawa’s incorporation in a base and tourism-dependent economy had the prefecture reeling.

The International Olympic Committee awarded the Games to Japan at its Buenos Aires meeting in 2013 because of then Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s assurance that the nuclear contamination brought on by the 2011 Fukushima tsunami/quake/meltdown had been resolved and everything was “under control.” That that was far from being so was plain even then and has become even more so since then as many thousands remain in exile from their homes or hometowns due to persistent radioactivity from sunken reactor cores and as wastewater containing high toxic substances accumulates in a massive array of tanks in the vicinity of Fukushima. With storage capacity in those tanks now close to limit, the Government of Japan is committed to dump them into the Pacific Ocean, starting in the near future.

The same government that assured the international community in 2013 that it had the Fukushima problem “under control” in 2021 offered similar assurances in 2020 and 2021

that the Games and Paralympic Games would be conducted in completely “safe and secure” mode. Both claims lacked credibility. The Abe-Suga government (under Abe Shinzo from 2012 to 2020 and Suga Yoshihide from 2020) is shaken by scandal, careless of public criticism and demand, and half-heartedly incompetent in dealing with the pandemic. It therefore slides in the polls. A Mainichi poll reported on 28 August that public support had fallen to an abysmal 26 per cent level. Following a Yokohama city mayoral election in August in which an independent critic of government defeated a close associate of the Prime Minister by an extraordinary 180,000 votes, the government’s own pollsters report that, in the event of any election being held today the ruling Liberal-Democratic Party would haemorrhage seats and potentially lose

government.⁵ In that event, the Olympic and Paralympic celebrations, initially expected to open the door to its electoral triumph, might do the opposite.

Early in September, the Games will end. But instead of the blaze of Olympic and Paralympic glory that government had hoped would open the door upon a new spell of government for Prime Minister Suga and the Liberal-Democratic Party, political and social problems steadily deepen. Contaminated waters accumulate. The virus continues to spread. The health system is strained to the limit. And challengers for the Prime Ministership sharpen their knives ahead of a 29 September leadership election.

Gavan McCormack is an emeritus professor of Australian National University (ANU). A graduate of the University of Melbourne (arts and law, MA in history) and SOAS University of London (PhD 1974), he taught at the Universities of Leeds, La Trobe and Adelaide before joining ANU. He is also an editor of the *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* and the author of many books and articles on aspects of modern East Asian, many of them published also in Japanese, Korean and Chinese translation.

Notes

¹ “Tokyo, Okinawa no corona kansen no dai bakuhatsu wa Indo koe, shusaku made ni wa 2 kagetsu ka,” *Nikkan Gendai*, 14 August 2021.

² For one statement, issued over the names of former ambassador to France Iimura Yutaka, Tokyo University emeritus professor and renowned sociologist and feminist Ueno Chizuko, and composer Saegusa Nariyuki, “Yushikasha no kai, Oripara chushi no seimei,” *Akahata*, 8 August 2021.

³ “Daily COVID-19 cases set records across Japan as counts surging,” *Asahi Shimbun*, 18 August 2021.

⁴ “Miyakojima, ‘sekai saiaku no kansenchu’ ni natta,” *Okinawa Times*, 19 August 2021.

⁵ “Jiminto ni shogeki no chosa kekka! Shugiin ‘60 giseki gen’ de masaka no kahansu ware,” *Nikkan gendai*, 25 August 2021.