

Sport

Tokyo changes its tone

TOKYO, Sept 14: The Japanese Olympic Committee on Wednesday backed down from threats to withdraw support for Asian sport supremo Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahad for inviting Taiwan's President to the Asian Games, reports AFP.

Japan's National Olympic Committee president Hironoshi Furuhashi said "The situation is moving toward a settlement".

Furuhashi said the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) decision to bar "political figures" from the Asian Games next month in Hiroshima had based tension.

"We will not call him (Sheikh Ahmad) to account unless the situation is strained further," Furuhashi told a news conference.

Furuhashi suggested Tuesday that Japan might not support Sheikh Ahmad's re-election to the presidency of the OCA because of the invitation he sent to president Lee Teng-Hui. The national committee's executive board decided Wednesday though not to press ahead with the threat.

The Kuwaiti Sheikh's invitation drew protests from Beijing and the threat of a

Chinese boycott.

Furuhashi and other Japanese sport leaders lobbied for a solution to the stalemate during the International Olympic Committee (IOC) congress in Paris last month. Press reports said this led to the OCA statement banning "political figures".

The statement effectively



revoked the invitation to Lee even though Taiwan officials insist his planned visit will go ahead.

Furuhashi, who returned Tuesday from the World Swimming Championships in Rome, was quoted as telling Japanese reporters that his committee should re-examine confidence in Sheikh Ahmad.

"A vote of no-confidence against him means a vote of no-confidence against Taiwan. It will sow a rift in Asia," he said.

Taiwan finally gives in

TAIPEI, Taiwan, Sept 14: Taiwan appeared to be readying Wednesday to concede defeat in its efforts to defy China and send its president to the opening ceremony of the Asian Games in Japan. reports AFP.

One day after insisting Lee Teng-Hui would attend the ceremony, despite the apparent withdrawal of his invitation, presidential aides said they were prepared to accept a rejection.

"The OCA's attitude is still unclear... If President Lee can go, he will. But if he can't go, so be it," Tsiang Yien-tesi, Lee's secretary general, told reporters.

The OCA is the Kuwait-based Olympic Council of Asia, which triggered the ruckus by inviting Lee and appeared to reverse itself this week by saying no "political figures" would be invited.

China regards Taiwan as a renegade province with no right of self-government, and it has threatened to boycott next month's Asian Games in Hiroshima if Lee attends.

If Lee is forced to stay away,

it would be the latest of Taiwan's setbacks in its planned diplomatic war with its Communist rival in Beijing.

It also would disappoint the Taiwanese public, which is fed up with China's attempts to isolate the island and wanted Lee to insist on going to Japan.

Many viewed the invitation as an opportunity for Lee to visit Japan, a neighbour that has repeatedly slammed its door on him. But Japan clearly did not relish a fight with China, and refrained from saying whether it would honour the invitation.

The United States also observes the boycott. In May, it denied Lee an overnight stay at Hawaii when his plane made a refuelling stop.

Last week, Washington announced a loosening of restrictions on contact with Taiwanese officials, but the Taiwan government complained that the change was too modest.

Now newspaper and politicians are calling on Taiwan to spare itself further humiliation.

The chess game over

Yong refutes drug charges

HONG KONG, Sept 14: China's women swimmers went through "torture" to reach their pre-eminence in the pool, according to the country's first Olympic swimming champion who rejected accusations of drug-taking, reports AFP.

Zhuang Yong told the Hong Kong Standard newspaper the swimmers reached the top on a diet of herbs, training 364 days a year and keeping away from boys. Before competition, she said, the squad was put through special mountain training she described as "real torture" because the air was so thin the women could "only just manage to breathe."

China has borne the brunt of increasing suspicions of drug-taking by international swimmers. China's women's squad accounted for five of the 10 world records broken at last week's World Championships in Rome. The squad won all but four of the women's titles.

But Zhuang, who won a gold at the Barcelona Olympics in 1992, leaped to the defence of the squad she now helps train. She said China had spent 20 years preparing for the current domination of the pool.

"Our success is absolutely not from 'drugs' but through the hard work of the coaches and swimmers," said Zhuang, 22, who retired after winning her title and is now an assistant to national coach Zhou

Ming.

"Anyone who knows how we internationals train would be totally convinced of our achievements," she added.

Zhuang said the swimmers chosen for the national squad trained every day of the year except the lunar new year's day. "Every day we had to train six hours in the pool and two hours in the gym," she was quoted as saying.

"We had no television, no entertainment, no dating, no home visits during our years of training," said the swimming star from Shanghai who was groomed for international competition after winning several regional titles.

"We trained night and day just for one objective perfect performance. That was the whole meaning of life at that time."

Zhuang said her silver medal in the 100 metre freestyle in the 1988 Seoul Olympics was a signal to the world of China's rising status. "But few paid any attention to us."

"When I won the first gold in the Olympics in 1992, they said I was helped by drugs. They didn't know I had prepared for that moment for six years."

Zhuang emphatically denied that drugs were involved in her preparation.

She said the swimmers' food had Chinese herbs and medicine mixed in it "to better our body quality."

Westerners won't believe

(Lee's) visit to Hiroshima is over... If we continued to play it, we would turn a good game into a losing one," the influential China Times editorialized.

"We could force Kuwait to make the withdrawal of invitation more explicit or try other methods to force (the president's) way into the Asian Games. But either action would be meaningless," it said.

This is not a matter of life and death," Cheng Chien-Jen, a lawmaker of Lee's Nationalist Party and a former diplomat, said in an interview. "If President Lee could go, we would score a grand slam. If not, we have at least gone part of the way."

You Jih-Jeng, another Nationalist lawmaker, said Taiwan ignored political reality in pushing for Lee's attendance at Hiroshima.

"Eyeing mainland China's huge market, even the United States has to make some concessions," You said. "What cards does Japan hold that would justify angering a neighbour so powerful, both militarily and economically?"

this but we have had practical experience for more than 2,000 years."

Zhuang became so strong from the army-style training that she surprised male athletes on a visit to Hong Kong by lifting 230 pounds (104.5 kilos).

"Quite often we had to put on clothes, trousers and shoes to swim," she said. "We had to struggle really hard to survive in the water with all that gear on."

"But once we had got rid of it we could swim like fish in competitions."

Chinese coaches developed their own tricks to boost the women's strength. They would cut up bicycle inner tubes and tie one end to the poolside and the other to the swimmer's waist, Zhuang explained.

Before competitions, the squad was taken to high altitude training in Kunming, 2,300 metres above sea level. "It was real torture," said Zhuang. "With air so you can only just manage to breathe."

"And yet we had to undergo the same intensive training which made us suffocate all the time."

Zhuang's opinion of those who suspect China of using drugs was clear. "Anyone who says China emerged all of a sudden is ignorant."

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