



AS IT IS

South Sudan Athletes Train in Japan Although Olympics in Doubt

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The coronavirus worldwide health crisis forced the postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics to this year. It remains unclear if the games will take place as planned in July 2021.

Athletes around the world who hope to qualify for the Olympics are still trying to stay fit. That includes a group of four runners from the world's youngest country, South Sudan. They are training with one of their **coaches** in Japan. The runners are working out in Maebashi, a city about 100 kilometers from Tokyo.

Many athletes, who are among the best in the world at their events, were sad when the virus caused the Olympics to be postponed. But the African athletes said they do not mind the delay because they are able to improve.

Eighteen-year-old Akoon Akoon is one of those athletes. He competes in the 400-meter race and the hurdles. He said he is just putting all his attention on his training.

“I don't want to **confuse** my mind,” he said.

Both the head of the International Olympic Committee and the Prime Minister of Japan, Yoshihide Suga, recently expressed their desire to hold the games as planned later this year.

A Japanese newspaper, however, recently asked athletes what they wanted. Most of the athletes who **responded** – 86 percent – said they wanted the games delayed again or canceled altogether. In Japan, the government recently declared a “state of emergency” in Tokyo and several other areas.

Abraham Majok competes in the 1500 meter race. The 21-year-old runner said it will be important for people from South Sudan to see athletes from their country at the Olympics.

That is because South Sudan is a country that is still healing from a civil war. Images of athletes from South Sudan at the Olympics will help the nation develop a sense of being one group of people.

“The image of the team here is a big sign of **unity**, because all of us are from different states,” said Majok.

“When our people back home watch us all from different states working together...and representing the country at the world level, the people will really be happy.”

About 400,000 people died during the war in South Sudan. The warring groups signed a peace treaty in 2018, but many agreements have not yet been put in place.

The city of Maebashi is trying to help the South Sudanese runners. Groups have donated about \$300,000 to support their training. Other people are spending time helping the runners with life in Japan.

The total will be enough to pay for their stay through the completion of the games — If they happen.

And if they don't?

“There's always 2024,” said one city official.

The 2024 Games will be in Paris.

I'm Dan Friedell.

Kiyoshi Takenaka wrote this story for Reuters. Dan Friedell adapted it for Learning English. Mario Ritter, Jr. was the editor.

What do you think of the African athletes training in Japan? We want to hear from you. Write to us in the Comments Section.

Words in This Story

coach- n. a person who teaches and trains an athlete or performer

confuse- v. to make (something) difficult to understand

respond- v. to say or write something as an answer to a question or request

unity- n. the state of being in full agreement
