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The Commonwealth Games: Can India Avoid a Debacle?

By **SUMON K. CHAKRABARTI** / NEW DELHI Thursday, Sep. 23, 2010

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Cranes work at the site of a footbridge that collapsed outside the Jawaharlal Nehru stadium in New Delhi on Sept. 21, 2010
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7 The 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi may have been intended to showcase India as a cosmopolitan emerging economic powerhouse, but with just 11 days to go, the event threatens to become a debacle of epic proportions. The collapse of a footbridge outside the flagship Jawaharlal Nehru stadium on Tuesday (which injured 30 people) and the caving-in of the ceiling at the Games' weightlifting

venue the following day appeared to symbolize the end of India's dream of hosting the "best ever" Commonwealth Games. Advanced parties dispatched to the venues by a number of participating countries have been so outraged by the hygiene and safety conditions at the athletes' village that they have threatened to withdraw from the event, and Commonwealth Games Federation President Michael Fennel will on Thursday hold emergency talks with India's Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, in the hope of saving the Games from degenerating into a farce. But Indian officials believe the complaints are wildly exaggerated, and some say unrealistic standards are being demanded of the organizers.

Indian organizers of the event are annoyed at Fennel, who they believe has changed his tone under pressure from some of the key participating countries. His previously upbeat assessment of preparations as recently as a month ago gave way to a harshly critical tone in a letter addressed by Fennel to India's Cabinet Secretary K.M. Chandrasekhar, appointed last month by the

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Prime Minister to oversee the Games' preparation after a litany of corruption allegations.

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Many of the countries whose advanced parties have visited the athletes' facility have warned that "the Commonwealth Games Village is seriously compromised," Fennel wrote on Monday. He changed his tone, a leading member of the Indian Organizing Committee alleged to TIME on conditions of anonymity, after some member associations denounced conditions inside the village as "unlivable." A meeting was held between the host committee and the Commonwealth Games Associations of Canada, New Zealand, Scotland, England and Wales on Sept. 16 and 17 to discuss the lack of "hygiene, cleanliness and preparedness" of the residential areas of the Games' village. The minutes of that meeting, which TIME has seen, do little to support the claims by Indian organizers that New Delhi's Commonwealth Games will rival Beijing's 2008 Olympics.

The minutes reflect New Zealand's representative refusing to allow their athletes to use "these dirty and unhygienic bathrooms," which the English delegates called "disgusting." And Scotland pointed out that stray dogs loitered freely around the residential areas and even soiled beds in which athletes are expected to sleep by next week. There were piles of rubbish around the 34 apartment towers, delegates at the meeting complained, and some plumbing and wiring was not operational, while some ground-floor apartments were flooded, and the standing water increased the risk of dengue fever — New Delhi is facing a major outbreak of the disease, which has infected 2,450 people so far.

(See pictures of India's transformation.)

With a number of countries having delayed the arrival of their teams because of the state of the athletes' village, Fennel warned that "timely acceptable solutions to prepare for the arrival of athletes are of paramount importance." But the Indian organizers seem unfazed.

Urban Development Minister Jaipal Reddy, who is also the head of the Group of Ministers on the Commonwealth Games, was dismissive. "There are complaints about cleanliness and maintenance, but these complaints are being addressed," said Reddy, whose ministry is responsible for most of the construction work around the Games, adding, "Some friends could be too finicky." Organizing Committee Secretary General Lalit Bhanot even suggested that the problem was a cultural difference in standards of hygiene. "These rooms are clean to both you and us," Bhanot told reporters. "However, it may not appear so to some others. They want certain standards in hygiene and cleanliness which may differ from our perception." **(Watch a video about Slumdog Millionaire's opening in India.)**

Chief Minister of Delhi Sheila Dixit couldn't understand the alarm raised by the bridge collapse. "The footbridge was not meant for athletes and delegates," she said on Tuesday. "It was for the use of common man." On Wednesday, she insisted that "minor hitches and glitches" would not prevent the Games from going ahead. But even as she was speaking, Scotland and Canada postponed the departure of their first parties of athletes for the Games, saying they hoped to give the organizers more time to address the problems.

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address the problems.

New Zealand officials threatened to withdraw from the Games if the village is deemed uninhabitable on Oct. 3, when the tournament is scheduled to begin, and indicated that they would support the decision of individual athletes to stay home. Australia took a similar position. A number of high-profile athletes from England, Australia and Kenya have already withdrawn, citing health or security concerns, and more withdrawals are expected. Canada on Wednesday instructed its athletes to postpone plans to travel to India pending further review of conditions in New Delhi, and Wales took a similar stance.

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Safety also remains a major concern for the 12-day sporting extravaganza. India's Central Vigilance Commission warned in August that the infrastructure built for the Games was in poor shape, chiefly because of "large-scale corruption, usage of substandard material and repeated delays." The report warned that the Games, expected to draw at least 150,000 spectators, could be hazardous for athletes and spectators. "There is no guarantee of quality of the work done for the Games," the report warned, because quality certificates for much of the completed work are suspect or faked. "Electrical mishaps cannot be ruled out."

The footbridge and weightlifting venue collapses appear to have confirmed the commission's premonitions. Even if it doesn't get any worse, the shambles on display this week suggest that India's best hopes for the Games have been sabotaged by corrupt and bungling officials.

Sumon K. Chakrabarti is the chief national correspondent for CNN-IBN.

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S Nagappa

The question I would like to ask is how many people and companies have made money either by greasing the pockets of ministers, beurocrats and how many UK, US, Aussie, canadian companies made money out of this. remember the Iraq war for democracy? It is a war to make money for all concerned. Dont blame just Indians here blame the games bosses and ask them why they even allowed a country whihc has over 700 million below poverty line to host this game for what? superpower? are they on something that the rest of the world does not know about. I wish Time would investigate this matter regarding the money trail. The show is give the games to a country whihc is known for its corruption, pretend that you are doing it because it could be a superpower (my foot) and then skim off as much as possible and then if things go wrong blame them. Nice little package isnt it. How much was this holiday package for the CW Games organization. who will investigate this Commongate? How ever anyone tries to play the blame game the stench of corruption is not only Indian but also others involved in approving the bid. When they were delayed in construction why so many excuses made? when workers were working without safety gear why no provision was made for it? When workers were sleeping on under construction roads due to lack of accomodation what was Mr. fennell doing ? one is not that blind. Every violation of human rights and occupational leath and safety and labour laws were violated yet Fennell was conveniently disregarding it just so that his involvement would not come into question. Isnt this supposedly international games? where were the unions when these violations were happening? so amny people got injured during bridge collapse yet no mention of huamsn cost of this abomonation called games for a few rich people to enjoy on the blood sweat and tears of so many. Every gold medalist here needs feel tainted as they are taking the medal over ill treatment of their fellow humans. Dengue is not the problem here. the mosquitoes only suck blood because that is their habit. but these CW games western owners are having fun by sucking the blood of so many for so long. Dengue is nothing compared to these blood suckers. Time please investigate this matter as the money trail is too obvious.

Today, 05:30:08 - Flag - Reply



andi bechsheim

The games are meant to showcase India's arrival as a Superpower. Instead, it laid bare India's incompetent bureaucracy and systemic corruption.

That being said, you would the priority is to ensure clean water access to 65% of the population and a hygienic working sewage system.

As it is, any open space you find in india is a toilet regardless of privacy concern.

It's truly shocking to see India hasn't improved much beyond the outsourcing industry and weapons buildup.

2 days ago, 19:10:22 - Flag - Reply



dave

England 'Will Go to Commonwealth Games'

England's athletes have been told that they are definitely going to the Commonwealth Games in India

<http://www.newslook.com/videos/252795-england-will-go-to-commonwealth-games?autoplay=true>

2 days ago, 11:31:15 - Flag - Reply



dave

someone call tech support quick... Footbridge Collapses Near Commonwealth Games Stadium

A footbridge under construction near the Commonwealth Games main stadium in New Delhi collapsed Tuesday, injuring at least 27 people, and leading many to question the viability of the games with only a few days to go

<http://www.newslook.com/videos/252058-footbridge-collapses-near-commonwealth-games-stadium?autoplay=true>

3 days ago, 05:26:41 - Flag - Reply



Divya Ghosh

I am indian and i completely agree with each of your analysis of this country.
All that hokum they feed you about india being a potential superpower is plane wishful thinking and an arrant poverty of rational analysis.
700million rupees of public money spent on these games now lining the pockets of corrupt politicians, when this event was actually meant to showcase Indias willingness to make progress and break out of the displeasing image and stereotype many hold of it, wound up reinforcing just that.

The Commonwealth games must be boycotted by every country that prides itself of being intolerant to depravity.
3 days ago, 01:31:42 - Flag - Reply



sarah lafsar

see more on time <http://www.lafsar.com>
4 days ago, 18:22:59 - Flag - Reply



Thomas Simmons

I couldn't believe the comment that the collapse of the footbridge wasn't a big deal because the bridge was only for the common people and not for the Athletes. I guess the common man or people are disposable.
4 days ago, 16:41:18 - Flag - Reply



fred johnson

This is SOOO India.

Ask any businessman who's purchased their services, or any consumer who's had to deal with them....

Workers and managers in India could not care less about the quality of the service their customer receives.

If the procedures have been followed and the paperwork is right, nothing else matters to them.

If they build a house and it falls down, but they followed the procedures and paperwork, they feel they've done a great job.
4 days ago, 15:46:55 - Flag - Reply



Andrew

I am an indian living oversea's and i feel this is absolutely true. As long as the paperwork is all done, generally, indian contractors dont really care much for the quality of the final product.
4 days ago, 23:25:11 - Flag - Reply



Prakash Gomathinayagam

Hey, you see the guy who wrote this is Indian and wrote it from New Delhi. can you expect this democracy from anywhere else ? At least happy that we have so much freedom and democracy. Not even afraid of our Prime Minister 😊 . I agree it is shame on the Sports ministry.
4 days ago, 13:28:08 - Flag - Reply



dave

Ceiling Collapse Latest Issue for CWG Stadium This comes a day after a foot over-bridge next to the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium collapsed, injuring 23 labourers.

<http://www.newslook.com/videos/252116-ceiling-collapse-latest-issue-for-cwg-stadium?autoplay=true>
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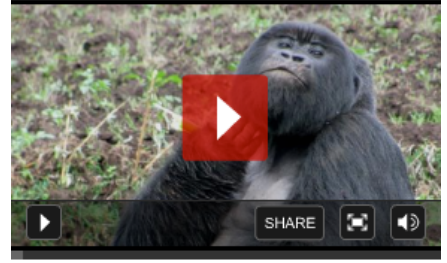
MAHMOUD ABBAS, Palestinian Authority President, saying he would wait at least a week before deciding

whether to pull out of the Mideast peace talks, following the end of an Israeli moratorium on West Bank settlement construction

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