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Sarajevo Olympic Hopes

Bosnia's ethnic divide threatens to jeopardise Sarajevo's bid for Olympic glory

By Julie Poucher Harbin in Sarajevo (BCR No. 237, 12-April-01)

Back in 1984, Sarajevo hosted the 14th Winter Olympic Games - the largest and, most agree, best-organised winter games up to that point.

Seventeen years on, the Bosnian Olympic Committee, NOK, announced it would support the city's bid to host the games in 2010. The announcement was made in the partially reconstructed Zetra Olympic Hall, pulverised by mortar attacks in 1992.

If successful, Sarajevo will become the fourth city to host the Winter Olympics twice over. Furthermore, it will also be an extraordinary testament to the capital in which thousands died during its three and a half year siege.

Last week, the outgoing president of the International Olympic Committee, IOC, Juan Antonio Samaranch, whose first job was to officiate at the 1984 Games, revisited the Bosnian capital for the inauguration of the newly reformed NOK.

The committee's presidency will follow the model of the revolving three-member Bosnian state presidency as set up under the Dayton Peace Agreement. It is also expected that the new committee will help bring together Federation and Republika Srpska, RS, teams, sportsmen and women to compete together in international competitions.

Samaranch said Sarajevo had the sympathy of many IOC members but that the ethnic divide slighted its chances.

The dividing lines between the two Bosnian entities literally cut across the Olympic landscape. While mounts Jahorina and Trebevic lie in the RS, mounts Bjelasnica and Igman fall within the Bosnian-Croat Federation. Apart from the wreckage, signs alerting you to the danger of mines serve as potent reminders of the frontline fighting here during the war.

Many people in Sarajevo believe in the benefits of sport diplomacy. Sefik, a refugee from eastern Bosnia, currently studying at the university here is realistic about the games' unifying potential. "Everyone knows we are separated," he said but he is also hopeful that the games could bring the people from the two entities closer together.

One man has led the way to crossing the ethnic divide in the sportsworld. Outgoing president of the Bosnia's Olympic Committee, Bogic Bogicevic, has been pivotal to the creation of the NOK and was awarded the Olympic order by Samaranch last week for his "outstanding contribution to the promotion of Olympic ideals in the region".

Bogicevic admits the idea of hosting the Olympic flag in a city still bearing the scars of the conflict has at least as many critics as supporters. Though many see the games as a chance to symbolically heal rifts, more hardened realists believe the money needed to rebuild the Olympic courses and complexes would be better spent on repairing houses and paying pensions.

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But the reason the bidding procedure was initiated was to revitalise the region's flagging economy. It was conceived, as Bogicevic says, "exclusively for economic reasons".

Sarajevo's mayor Muhidin Hamamdzic thinks it's a great opportunity to bolster the regional economy by reviving winter tourism at a time when interest and investment in Bosnia are minimal. The number of jobs such a project would have to offer might also, according to Hamamdzic, stem the tide of young people leaving the country.

Although the facilities have been virtually destroyed, Enes Terzic, general manager of Zetra Olympic sports centre, believes most of the winter sports facilities are in a better position than they were in 1977 when the IOC picked Sarajevo to host the 1984 Games.

Terzic estimates that around at least 140 million German marks will be needed for the reconstruction of sports facilities and infrastructure. Added to this would be the cost of rebuilding at least five hotels.

His company has so far relied on credits and international aid to put the ski centres back into operation. Currently, Terzic is negotiating with potential donors, including Norway, Sweden, the EU, and Olympic Aid, for the second phase of the Zetra stadium reconstruction project which would include an indoor speed skating track and ice rink.

Bogicevic said that he and the city authorities are mainly counting on lucrative television rights to help finance the Olympic effort, should the city be chosen. They are also looking to business investors, loans, credits, and creative marketing.

The outgoing president has no delusions over fundraising difficulties and admits that fears of renewed conflict, land mines, and corruption work against them.

"Most people see Bosnia-Herzegovina as a country of corruption, drug smuggling, people trafficking and prostitution," Bogicevic said matter-of-factly. These are all matters that could seriously affect any IOC vote.

Bogicevic, however, believes that the new government will be able to resolve the divided country's political problems, and come together for the Games.

"I think there is obviously some reason for scepticism," commented International Crisis Group analyst Michael Doyle. "If it serves as a challenge for the local authorities to get their act together, then I think it could be a positive thing to try and get the candidacy."

Jelena Granzov watched the 1984 Games from her grandfather's chalet overlooking the ski-runs. She remembers how "exciting" it was to have foreign guests. Living in Pale, Bosnian Serb headquarters during the war, she now gives skiing lessons at Jahorina where she herself learned to ski.

She says she'd love the city to host the Games again, but feels a lot of time and money will have to be spent on getting facilities back up to scratch. "Jahorina is going to have to need a lot of work done to it," she said.

Julie Poucher Harbin is an IWPR contributor

