

Olympic Opening Ceremony Director Fired for Holocaust Joke

The Tokyo Olympic organizing committee fired the director of the opening ceremony on Thursday because of a Holocaust joke he made during a comedy show in 1998.

Organizing committee president Seiko Hashimoto said a day ahead of the opening ceremony that director Kentaro Kobayashi has been dismissed. He was accused of using a joke about the Holocaust in his comedy act, including the phrase "Let's play Holocaust."

"We found out that Mr. Kobayashi, in his own performance, has used a phrase ridiculing a historical tragedy," Hashimoto said. "We deeply apologize for causing such a development the day before the opening ceremony and for causing troubles and concerns to many involved parties as well as the people in Tokyo and the rest of the country."

Tokyo has been plagued with scandals since being awarded the Games in 2013. French investigators are looking into alleged bribes paid to International Olympic Committee members to influence the vote for Tokyo. The fallout forced the resignation two years ago of Tsunekazu Takeda, who headed the Japanese Olympic Committee and was an IOC member.

The opening ceremony of the pandemic-delayed Games is scheduled for Friday. The ceremony will be held without spectators as a measure to prevent the spread of coronavirus infections, although some officials, guests and media will attend.

"We are going to have the opening ceremony tomorrow and, yes, I am sure there are a lot of people who are not feeling easy

about the opening of the Games,” Hashimoto said. “But we are going to open the Games tomorrow under this difficult situation.”

Earlier this week, composer Keigo Oyamada, whose music was to be used at the ceremony, was forced to resign because of past bullying of his classmates, which he boasted about in magazine interviews. The segment of his music will not be used.

Soon after a video clip and script of Kobayashi’s performance were revealed, criticism flooded social media.

“Any person, no matter how creative, does not have the right to mock the victims of the Nazi genocide,” said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean and global social action director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Los Angeles-based human rights group.

He also noted that the Nazis gassed Germans with disabilities.

“Any association of this person to the Tokyo Olympics would insult the memory of 6 million Jews and make a cruel mockery of the Paralympics,” he said.

Kobayashi is a former member of a popular comedy duo Rahmens and known overseas for comedy series including “The Japanese Tradition.”

Japan is pushing ahead with the Olympics against the advice of most of its medical experts. This is partially due to pressure from the IOC, which is estimated to face losses of \$3 billion to \$4 billion in television rights income if the Games were not held.

The official cost of the Olympics is \$15.4 billion, but government audits suggest it’s much more. All but \$6.7 billion is public money.

“We have been preparing for the last year to send a positive message,” Hashimoto said. “Toward the very end now there are

so many incidents that give a negative image toward Tokyo 2020.”

Toshiro Muto, the CEO of the Tokyo organizing committee, also acknowledged the reputational damage.

“Maybe these negative incidents will impact the positive message we wanted to deliver to the world,” he said.

The last-minute scandals come as Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga’s government faces criticism for prioritizing the Olympics despite public health concerns amid a resurgence of coronavirus infections.

Koichi Nakano, who teach politics at Sophia University, wrote on Twitter that the opening ceremony chaos underscores a lack of awareness in Japan about diversity.

Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike said she learned of Kobayashi’s comments from Hashimoto.

“I was astonished,” she said.

Kobayashi’s Holocaust joke and Oyamada’s resignation were the latest to plague the Games. Yoshiro Mori resigned as organizing committee president over sexist remarks. Hiroshi Sasaki also stepped down as creative director for the opening and closing ceremonies after suggesting a Japanese actress should dress as a pig.

Also this week, the chiropractor for the American women’s wrestling team apologized after comparing Olympic COVID-19 protocols to Nazi Germany in a social media post. Rosie Gallegos-Main, the team’s chiropractor since 2009, will be allowed to finish her planned stay at USA Wrestling’s pre-Olympic camp in Nakatsugawa, Japan. {eo}

AP sportswriter Stephen Wade contributed to this report.

© 2021 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Follow breaking news like this and more in our new platform,
CHARISMA PLUS.