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IOC Backs Return of Russian Athletes as Individuals, No Timeline for Paris Olympics

By Coralie Febvre for AFP

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Fabrice Coffrini / AFP

Olympic chiefs on Tuesday recommended the return to competition of Russian and Belarusian athletes as individual neutrals, but refused to give a timeline on their potential participation at next year's Paris Olympics.

IOC president Thomas Bach said the body's Executive Board had recommended to international federations and international sports event organizers that "athletes with a Russian or a Belarusian passport must compete only as Individual Neutral Athletes."

German Sports Minister Nancy Faeser reacted immediately, calling the recommendation a "slap in the face" for Ukrainian athletes, who she said "deserve the solidarity of international sport."

"International sport must condemn Russia's brutal war of aggression in no uncertain terms. This can only be done with the complete exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes."

Poland's Deputy Foreign Minister Piotr Wawrzyk said it was a "day of shame for the IOC" after the "daily bombings of civilian sites."

But Moscow said forcing Russians to compete under a neutral flag would amount to "discrimination."

"The announced criteria for the return to international competitions are unacceptable. This is discrimination on the basis of nationality," Stanislav Pozdnyakov, the head of the Russian Olympic Committee, said as quoted by Russian news agencies.

Among other IOC recommendations — which Bach said were agreed unanimously — the IOC said "teams of athletes with a Russian or Belarusian passport cannot be considered."

Also missing out will be "athletes who actively support the war" as well as "athletes who are contracted to the Russian or Belarusian military or national security agencies."

Bach reiterated that the sanctions against "those responsible for the war, the Russian and Belarusian states and governments," must remain in place, having first been introduced after Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

That means Russia and Belarus are unable to organise international sports events on their territory.

Additionally, "no flag, anthem, colors or any other identifications whatsoever of these countries displayed at any sports event or meeting, including the entire venue" and "no Russian and Belarusian government or state official can be invited to or accredited for any international sports event or meeting."

'Appropriate time'

Bach, speaking after the executive board meeting in Lausanne, said a decision on athletes from Russia and Belarus taking part in Paris 2024 and the 2026 Winter Olympics, however, would be taken "at the appropriate time."

"The IOC will take this decision at the appropriate time, at its full discretion, and without being bound by the results of previous Olympic qualification competitions," Bach said.

"We want to monitor the implementation of these recommendations as long as possible... to be enabled to take an informed decision."

The board, he said, "did not consider it appropriate to give a timeline... no one knows what's happening tomorrow or in nine months."

Bach added the "participation of athletes with a Russian or Belarusian passport at the Olympic Games Paris 2024 was not considered either in the consultations or in its deliberations today."

"The IOC expressly reserves the right to decide about their participation at the appropriate time, even if they would be considered to have qualified according to the qualification criteria set by their respective International Federations (IFs).

"The IOC will closely monitor the full implementation of these recommendations by all parties concerned."

"The results of this monitoring procedure will be an important factor in the decision by the IOC concerning the participation of athletes with a Russian or Belarusian passport in the Olympic Games Paris 2024 and the Olympic Winter Games Milano Cortina 2026."

More than 300 active and former fencers had earlier called on Bach, who won Olympic fencing team gold in 1976, to uphold the ban on Russian and Belarusian athletes.

The FIE, the world fencing body, ruled this month to allow Russian and Belarusian fencers to return to international competition, becoming the first Olympic sport to reopen its events to athletes from the two countries.

In a hard-hitting letter, the fencers accused Bach and the interim president of their federation, Emmanuel Katsiadakis, of prioritizing Russians ahead of Ukrainians and dismissed the notion of neutrality, saying "athletes were and will be instrumentalized for Putin's propaganda."

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