

Global sport heavily disrupted by coronavirus

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The coronavirus is disrupting sport around the world with the MotoGP races in Qatar and Thailand postponed, a host of football matches put off to a later date and increasing concerns surrounding the Tokyo Olympics later this year.

The virus has already cast a long shadow over the start of the MotoGP season with this Sunday's curtain raising Qatar Grand Prix called off, followed by the March 22 race in Thailand.

"I don't say it's cancelled, I just say it is postponed until time allows us to do [the event]," Anutin Charnvirakul, chairman of the Thailand MotoGP organizing committee, told AFP.

One of the early races in the Formula One season, the Shanghai Grand Prix on April 19, has already been postponed although organizers say the season-opening race in Australia on March 15 will go ahead as planned.

Olympic chiefs are meeting on Tuesday and Wednesday in Lausanne to discuss the impact of the virus on preparations for the summer Games in Tokyo, and to address the unthinkable -- scrapping world sports' global showpiece for the first time in peace time.

Other events are under immediate threat. The remaining matches in the 2020 Six Nations rugby union tournament were at risk but an emergency meeting of the organizers in Paris on Monday made no immediate changes to the calendar.

The virus has killed more than 3,000 people worldwide, mainly in China, and its effects are

being felt across the global economy.

Sport is no exception.

In Italy, the European country with the highest number of deaths at 52, the outbreak wreaked havoc with Serie A football matches at the weekend.

Six games were postponed, including the clash between defending champions Juventus and title rivals Inter Milan in Turin, originally scheduled to be the showpiece match on Sunday evening.

The Italian government has signed a decree that stops sporting activity in the northern regions that have been worst hit by the virus until March 8, unless it is held behind closed doors.

That decision means another five matches next week can only go ahead if played in empty stadiums.

The Italian league has called an emergency meeting for Wednesday in which discussions will be held on how to manage the fixture chaos.

The International Ski Federation (FIS) has also said that it will decide on Friday whether or not the alpine skiing World Cup finals scheduled for later this month in Cortina d'Ampezzo, a host venue for the 2026 Winter Olympics, will go ahead.

Football in Asia has been massively disrupted, with the start of Japan's J-League postponed till mid-March and a hugely rearranged fixture list for the continental competitions.

On Monday, the Swiss football league also announced that its top two divisions had been suspended until March 23.

Six Nations under threat

Rugby officials gathered in the French capital to consider if more alterations are needed to the calendar for the final two rounds of the Six Nations Championship.

The March 7 game between Ireland and Italy in Dublin has already been postponed but officials determined that no further changes were needed -- at least for now.

"So far, apart from the Ireland v Italy match for our senior men's event, all matches are OK to take place but governments might decide otherwise and we need to be prepared for any eventuality," said a spokeswoman.

The UAE Tour, an early season cycling warm-up that featured four-time Tour de France winner Chris Froome, was cut short last week after a coronavirus scare.

Looking ahead, concerns are deepening over this year's main sports event, the Tokyo Olympics, which is due to begin on July 24.

Hundreds of thousands of spectators, athletes and officials will converge on Japan for the Games.

International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach said last week his organization was

"fully committed" to holding the Games in Tokyo as planned despite the widening coronavirus outbreak.

Ominously, the decision will depend on factors over which Olympic officials exert no control, and sports federations are already wringing their hands over disruption and forced cancellation of qualifying events for the global showpiece.
