

Seiko Hashimoto takes over as Tokyo 2020 chief after sexism scandal



Seiko Hashimoto, president of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics Organizing Committee, speaks during the Tokyo 2020 Executive Board meeting. (Photo: Yuichi Yamazaki/Pool via Reuters)

Tokyo, February 18 (RHC)-- Japan's Olympics Minister Seiko Hashimoto, a former Olympian who competed in seven Games, has taken over as Tokyo 2020's new president after the previous chief was forced out over sexist comments.

She was named president of the Tokyo Olympic organising committee on Thursday after a meeting of its male-dominated executive board. Hashimoto replaces 83-year-old Yoshiro Mori, a former Japanese prime minister who resigned last week after making sexist comments about women.

Following her appointment, Hashimoto said she would “spare no effort for the success of the Tokyo Games.”

Earlier on Thursday, the 56-year-old stepped down as one of just two women in Japan’s cabinet to take up her new post. In addition to her role as the Olympic minister in the cabinet of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, Hashimoto also held a portfolio dealing with gender equality and women’s empowerment.

She competed as a cyclist in three Summer Olympics and as a speedskater in four Winter Olympics. She won a bronze medal – her only medal – in 1992 in at 1,500 meters in speedskating.

Hashimoto was born in 1964 in Japan’s northern Hokkaido region, just five days before the opening ceremony of the last Tokyo Olympics and her parents drew inspiration from the lighting of the Olympic flame – seika in Japanese – when naming her.

She recounts growing up being constantly told by her father “‘you were born to go to the Olympics’... even before I knew that the Olympics was.” Her appointment comes just over five months before the virus-postponed Games, with public opinion in Japan still largely against holding the massive event this year.

There are fears about bringing tens of thousands of athletes, fans, and support teams into Japan, which has controlled the coronavirus better than most countries.

There is also opposition to the soaring costs. The official cost is \$15.4 billion, though several government audits say the price is at least \$25 billion, the most expensive Summer Olympics on record, according to a University of Oxford study.

Naming a woman as the president of Tokyo 2020 could be breakthrough for gender equality in Japan, where females are underrepresented in boardrooms and in politics. Japan ranks 121st out of 153 countries on the World Economic Forum’s annual gender equality ranking.

Hashimoto has called cancellation or another postponement “inconceivable”, echoing the sentiments of Tokyo 2020 organisers and the International Olympic Committee. “For the Games next year, athletes are continuing to work hard in the environments they find themselves in. So, I feel we have to hold it at any cost,” she had said in September last year.

Suga, the Japanese prime minister, is likely to name Tamayo Marukawa, a former television announcer and ruling party legislator, to Hashimoto’s post, NHK public television said. Marukawa, 50, previously held the job for about a year.

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