

Thousands of farmers pushed from their land

Beijing spends big as it prepares for 2022 Olympics

CHONGLI, China, Feb 27, (AFP): Villages are being razed in northern China. Mountains are being cut to size. And new stadiums, high-speed train lines, expressways and three separate Olympic villages are coming to life.

With the Pyeongchang Games in South Korea having wrapped up on Sunday, the focus turns to Beijing as China spends big to host its first Winter Olympics in 2022.

Still four years out, the tab for the Games has ticked upwards, with outlays appearing to eclipse the budget in Beijing's winning bid by at least half a billion dollars, according to an AFP

OLYMPICS

review of government requests for the massive project.

Beijing won the Games for its willingness to spend. For the 2008 Summer Olympics the nation poured in an estimated \$40 billion.

That event amounted to a stunning coming out party for the rising giant — but afterwards many of the venues sat empty.

Beijing has pledged this time will be different, with officials drumming up sustainable development and post-Olympics plans for the heap of new facilities.

But in Chongli, where snowboard and ski events like the halfpipe will run, thousands of farmers are being pushed from their land.

In Taizicheng village, the site of a



Japanese figure skater and gold medalist Yuzuru Hanyu (right), receives flowers at Narita International Airport near Tokyo, as Japan team returned home from the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics on Feb 26. (AP)

planned Olympic village, mammoth train station and snow town, only soil remains where villagers' homes once stood.

Up the valley, the brick and red-tiled roof homes of Qipanliang village where 300 families once lived were abandoned earlier this year and are set to be demolished.

A new expressway and high-speed train for whisking athletes to events will cut through the area.

Ying Gui, 64, and his family of five are among the few remaining villagers.

"We will leave once we sell all this," said his daughter-in-law, waving at the candies, rice wine and gloves packed onto the shelves of their home, which doubles as the village store.

"We will have no home, no land for crops, nothing at all left," she said, adding however that she was satisfied with the compensation offered by the government.

After 2 golds, Hanyu wants to master quad axel

TOKYO, Feb 27, (AP): After winning two Olympic gold medals, Yuzuru Hanyu wants to master a quadruple axel.

Hanyu, who at the Pyeongchang Games became the first man to repeat as Olympic champion in 66 years, told a news conference on Tuesday he hoped to be the first, or at least one of the first figure skaters to accomplish the 4-1/2 revolutions in competition.

"No one in competition has achieved successful quadruple axel jumps and there are very few people actually practicing even during training," Hanyu said. "I want to continue my challenge towards achieving my dream of successfully performing the quad axel, even if I may not be the first person to do so."

The usually articulate Hanyu struggled with questions at the

Foreign Correspondent's Club of Japan, where he was asked to describe how difficult the jump is and to show something of it.

He dropped his head to the podium, and said a quadruple axel is like jumping rope four times while revolving twice with one's eyes closed.

Even though top skaters have achieved success in five of the six quadruple jump varieties, only a few are practicing the more difficult quadruple axel, which requires an additional half-turn, he said.

Asked if he would go beyond that, Hanyu said he was interested.

Scientists say humans can go as far as quintuple, Hanyu said, and his childhood coach is encouraging him to go for it.

"I would like to give it a try in the future, if possible," he said. "A quintuple and half could be beyond my

reach though."

He says those difficult jumps add to the artistry of a performance only when performed with excellent basic technique.

Hanyu, who was off ice until January while recovering from a right ankle injury, said his gold medal in Pyeongchang was not easily won. The pain in the ankle was still only "20 to 30 percent" down from the worst.

"I bet my life for this gold medal," the 23-year-old Hanyu, who returned home on Monday, told the packed news conference. "I am alive and here," he joked, "I am not dying."

Hanyu said he was proud to have repeated as champion in a sport traditionally dominated by Europeans.

"I believe it was a historic step forward that I was able to win the gold medal using Japanese music for my program," he said.

billion allocated in China's bid for the Games, show Beijing is once again pulling out all the stops to put on a flawless Winter Olympics.

The rural corridor north of the city is turning into ski fields, stadiums and housing.

Millions have been budgeted just to bring water to the area and build artificial snow blowers.

"It's 100 percent man-made snow," said a snowcat driver as he groomed the

nearby Genting ski resort, which will hold some events.

China's new national sliding centre (for bobsledding and luge) will run to at least \$257 million. The national alpine ski centre for ski racing will cost \$311 million. A Nordic centre with ski jumping is estimated at \$246 million.

Even projects to rehabilitate land scarred by mining that tourists might see out the window as they hurtle north from Beijing are under way.

Upstarts upstage snow queens

Ledecka, Goggia leave indelible marks

PYEONGCHANG, South Korea, Feb 27, (RTRS): Czech shredder Ester Ledecka and Italian Samurai Sofia Goggia left indelible marks on the Alpine skiing at an Olympics that were supposed to be about Americans Mikaela Shiffrin and Lindsey Vonn stamping their authority on the sport.

Snowboarder Ledecka's win in the super-G was quite simply the most stunning result in the sport for years, perhaps ever, while the irrepressible Goggia's downhill triumph took the marquee title to Italy for the first time.

The freezing winds that tore through Pyeongchang in the first week of competition not only severely

disrupted the Alpine schedule but also quickly put paid to Shiffrin's ambitious bid for titles in all five individual events. Once her campaign did get underway, the 22-year-old struck gold at the first attempt in the giant slalom but having to back up 24 hours later in her pet event, the slalom, proved too tough and she had to settle for fourth behind Swede Frida Hansdotter.

If Shiffrin finishing off the podium with a sub-par performance in her slalom title defence was a major surprise, it was nothing to what would follow the next day at the Jeongseon Alpine Centre.

Anna Veith looked to have become the first woman to have successfully defended the super-G title and was receiving the congratulations of her rivals as the last few outsiders took their turns.

Suddenly, screaming down the mountain on a pair of skis which once had a home in Shiffrin's extensive

quiver came Ledecka, a gold medal favourite in snowboard but ranked 43rd in the World Cup super-G.

The lights flashed green as competitor number 26 crossed the line indicating a new race leader but no one — not Ledecka, not her rivals, not the crowd, not the TV stations who had already crowned Veith champion — could quite believe what she had done.

There was no mistake, though, and the 22-year-old was soon gifting the Games one of its iconic images by answering questions at the press conference in her ski goggles, unprepared to face the cameras without make-up.

If Ledecka, who went on to score an unprecedented double gold by winning the snowboard parallel giant slalom, presented the new, slightly obscured, face of Alpine skiing, Vonn was very much the establishment.

SKIING

The most successful female skier of all time, the 33-year-old won downhill gold and super-G bronze in Vancouver but had been forced to sit out the Sochi Games with one of the many injuries that have scarred her career.

A mistake when she skied wide right at the end of the super-G at Jeongseon almost certainly cost her a medal, if not the gold, but her hopes had always been pinned more on regaining the downhill title.

Goggia was no Alpine unknown like Ledecka and had fought a running battle with Vonn in the downhill on the World Cup circuit, her capacity for making mistakes at key moments having undermined her natural pace.

There were to be no mistakes when it mattered most, however, as the 25-year-old from Bergamo reined in the 'crazy horse' of her reputation and tapped into her inner Samurai to produce a run that Vonn and none of her other rivals could match.

Vonn shed tears of joys after claiming a bronze and declared that Pyeongchang would be her last Olympics — "probably".

Having learned her lesson from the quick turnaround between the two slalom races, Shiffrin skipped the downhill when a forecast return of the high winds prompted organisers to move the combined forward by a day.

After playing it safe in the downhill leg, she produced a brilliant performance in the slalom run only to come up just short of the gold medal-winning time set by Swiss Michelle Gisin, whose sister Dominique shared the downhill gold in Sochi.



Marit Bjoergen, of Norway, celebrates after winning the gold medal in the women's 30k cross-country skiing competition at the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, on Feb 25. (AP)

Norway hails Games glory

OSLO, Feb 27, (RTRS): Norwegians celebrated becoming the most successful ever nation at a Winter Olympics, after a triumphant campaign at Pyeongchang, but their Nordic reserve was on show too.

The nation of 5.3 million people won 39 medals, 14 of them gold. That broke the record of 37 medals won by the United States — whose population is more than sixty-times that of Norway's — at Vancouver in 2010.

Aksel Lund Svindal became the first Norwegian to win the Olympic men's downhill, the blue ribbon event of the Alpine skiing programme, and Norway took gold in biathlon, ski jumping, speed skating and freestyle skiing.

But the focus of celebrations was on Marit Bjoergen, who stormed to gold in the women's 30km mass start cross-country skiing on Sunday to claim her 15th Olympic medal. She is now the most decorated Winter Olympian of all time.

The front page of Norway's biggest daily, Aftenposten, showed a beaming Bjoergen, with no text except the newspaper's logo, framed by a gold medal. Tabloid VG printed the same picture with the headline: "Now you are the greatest!"

"She is fantastic," Prime Minister Erna Solberg told state broadcaster NRK.

Describing what made the athlete great, Solberg emphasised qualities held dear in the majority-Protestant country where Jante's Law — the Nordic equivalent of Britain's tall poppy syndrome whereby individual success is often scorned — holds sway.

"She is down-to-earth, direct, she shares her joy with everyone around her. All we hear is that she is a motivator for everyone else in the team," Solberg said.

"She is a great team player ... and she contributes to others being great too."



Ester Ledecka, of the Czech Republic, runs the course during the women's parallel giant slalom qualification run at Phoenix Snow Park at the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, on Feb 24. (AP)

Athletes driven by sense of achievement

Most Olympians will never get rich

PYEONGCHANG, South Korea, Feb 27, (AP): You see them everywhere after the Olympics, the beaming faces and chiseled physiques of superstar athletes on everything from cereal boxes to athletic shoe ads.

Here is what you don't see: The countless other Olympians who will never get a lucrative endorsement deal, who toil in relative obscurity, who struggle to pay their bills and balance work schedules with intense training just for a chance to compete with the best.

The reality for most Olympians couldn't be farther from that of the charmed few who live off endorsements and sponsorships.

"If you're curling because you want to be a millionaire, you're in the wrong sport," Canadian curler Ben Hebert said with a chuckle after a recent game in Pyeongchang.

Most of the athletes competing at the Pyeongchang Games know they will never get rich off their athletic feats. Some barely break even. They are driven not by money, but by a sense of achievement, of pride, of a chance at grabbing a glory that most of us never could.

Still, that glory doesn't come cheap. So to fund their dreams, Olympians set up crowd-funding websites, look for jobs with odd hours that won't interfere with practice, or work overtime to save

up money in the offseason so they can cut back when it's time to hit the road.

Hebert works as a sales manager for a land surveying company in Calgary. Because his company is one of the curling team's sponsors, his bosses have given him flexibility with his schedule. But it's still not easy.

His wife has to handle the care for their 4-year-old daughter and 8-month-old son while he's competing. When

he's not away, he tries to maximize his time at home by dashing to the curling club for practice on his lunch break. After work, he plays with the kids and then heads to bed.

"There's a lot that goes into the sacrifice of being an amateur athlete at the Olympics, but being here and seeing all the other athletes in the opening ceremonies and competing for medals, that's why you do it," he said.

"There's a lot of really, really good Canadian curlers, athletes that sacrifice just as much as we do, and they're not here. So we're the lucky ones."

Hebert's teammate, Kevin Koe, works full time as a surface landman for an oil and gas company, liaising with landowners and farmers. He often finds himself working even while on the road for curling competitions, making calls and answering emails in between matches.



Dancers perform during the closing ceremony of the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympic Games at the Pyeongchang Stadium on Feb 25. (AFP)

OCA congratulates organisers of Pyeongchang

KUWAIT CITY, Feb 27: The Olympic Council of Asia has praised and congratulated the organisers of the Pyeongchang 2018 Olympic Winter Games that came to a successful conclusion on Sunday night.

Pyeongchang 2018 is the first of three consecutive Olympic Games to be staged in the so-called "Asian Era" and will be followed by the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics and Beijing 2022 Winter Games.

"The OCA would like to congratulate Korea and the International Olympic Committee for the excellent organisation of the 2018 Winter Olympic Games in Pyeongchang, Korea," said the OCA President, HE Sheikh Ahmad

Al Fahad Al Sabah.

"The whole of Asia can feel proud about the success of the 2018 Winter Olympic Games in Korea and this demonstrates the commitment of the Asian continent to develop winter sports and promote the values of the Olympic Games.

"The technical aspects of Pyeongchang 2018 reflect well on the OCA's Asian Winter Games, particularly the 8th AWG held in Sapporo, Japan, in February 2017. Many of the top athletes from Sapporo 2017 have gone on to win medals in Pyeongchang 2018, including several gold medals."

A total of 451 Asian athletes qualified to represent 19 Asian National

Olympic Committees in Pyeongchang.

Asia won a total of 40 medals, comprising 10 gold medals, 19 silver and 11 bronze. Korea finished seventh in the final medal table with a gold-silver-bronze record of 5-8-4 (total 17), followed by Japan in 11th place with 4-5-4 (13), China in 16th with 1-6-2 (9) and Kazakhstan (28) with 0-0-1.

Thirty NOCs of the 92 competing won medals.

HE Sheikh Ahmad concluded: "The OCA would like to thank Korea, the IOC, the Asian athletes and all the Asian NOCs who participated in the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympic Games and contributed to such an outstanding success enjoyed by the world."