

Guarding the Games



London Summer Olympics organizers seek to balance safety and accessibility

By *per Concordiam* Staff

When more than 10 million guests flood into London for the 2012 Summer Olympics, 25,000 police officers and security guards will try to maintain a tactful balancing act: Provide safety for hundreds of athletic events while keeping intrusions and heavy-handedness to a minimum.

British Olympic organizers not only have to deal with the shadows of Olympics past, including the notorious kidnappings at the 1972 Munich Games, but also recent threats exemplified by the 2005 London terror bombings and the 2011 riots that raged across the British capital. Britain's multiyear effort to provide a safe and inviting experience for more than 10,000 athletes from 200 countries will cost a minimum of 750 million euros, making it the nation's biggest domestic security operation since World War II. Should the British model work as planned, the Russians could emulate it when they host the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014, an event violent extremists have publicly vowed to disrupt.

"It is the basic feeling to have a sense of security but it is equally important not to exaggerate. Not to curtail the rights of those visiting. Not to have seven or eight controls and have 2 to 3 hours of travel time," Helmut Spahn, former head of security for the 2006 World Cup soccer championships in Germany, told Reuters in story about the Olympics in September 2011. "You don't have to see security. It can operate in the background. Successful events will be those that have flexible plans, prepared for every scenario."

Years of preparation

Britain has spent years honing its safety and security strategy for the games that will run from July 27 to August 12. Organizers have installed thousands of video surveillance cameras, hundreds of X-ray machines, 17 kilometers of electrified perimeter fences and other equipment into the infrastructure of its Olympic venues centered on East London. Armed unmanned aircraft, road and railroad surveillance, Royal Navy warships moored on the Thames River: All are meant to deter and, if necessary, combat any attempts at violent extremism.

As many as 15,000 private security guards could join more than 10,000 police officers to guarantee the safety of spectators and athletes in 34 locations spread around the Greater London area. Britain's Home Office even established an Olympic Security Directorate that, if necessary, could tap the more than 1 billion euros contained in the government's annual counterterrorism budget.

A national emergency committee has staged exercises mimicking threats to the Olympics. One event in September 2011, a month after the London riots, tried to anticipate a slew of disruptive scenarios. "We are going through the whole gamut – from food poisoning to terrorism through to heat waves and rail disruption," Alaric Bonthron of the London Metropolitan Police Service told The Associated Press. "We have to understand how we manage the games in those situations."

Troubled history

As the Olympic Games have evolved, so has the security apparatus needed to protect them. The games in the early part of the 20th century came off largely without violence, but by mid-century that began to change. The kidnapping of Israeli athletes that tarnished the 1972 Munich Summer Olympics was the most notorious from the standpoint of violence, but less well-known are the deadly riots that occurred on the eve of the Mexico City Games in 1968. Police and soldiers opened fire on mostly student protesters in the city center while athletes rested 11 miles (18 km) away in the Olympic Village in the suburbs of the Mexican capital. Hundreds died.

Pre-Olympic rioting – with none of the deadliness of Mexico City – also affected the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea. In 1996, an explosion from a pipe bomb at the Atlanta Summer Olympics in the United States killed

one person. The extent to which security has taken center stage is easily illustrated: Organizers of the 2004 Olympics in Athens – three years after the 9/11 attacks reignited fears of terrorists committing mass murder – spent 10 times more for security than was spent on the Atlanta games.

Britain's security strategy

London police were subjected to an unwanted trial run in reacting to the riots of August 2011, when the shooting of a London man set off violence, arson and looting as far away as Manchester and Birmingham. Police were criticized for acting too timidly at the beginning of the two weeks of mayhem, though 16,000 officers that swarmed the capital eventually restored order by making thousands of arrests. “We are still reviewing everything post-riots to make sure we have learned the lessons,” Bonthron said.

For Olympic security coordinator Chris Allison, assistant commissioner in the London police, one lesson was the need to broaden the security screen to take in sites outside the Olympic sports arenas. Otherwise, Allison warned, these more thinly patrolled areas could become “soft targets” for terrorists. “If there is a soft target 200 yards down the road from the main venue, and it’s got a couple of Olympic rings over the top of it, that’s where the baddies are going to go to,” Allison told *The Associated Press* in September 2011.

It’s not lost upon British organizers that the so-called London “tube” bombings of July 2005, in which 52 people were killed, occurred the day after the International Olympic Committee awarded the games to London.

A longer-term British strategy has been the use of the government’s Prevent program to suppress domestic Muslim extremism by subsidizing mainstream voices with a nonviolent outlook. Prevent-financed programs claim to have steered dozens of people away from violent extremism since 2007. “Radicalisation awareness among members of the public was a crucial factor leading to the arrest of aspiring suicide bomber Andrew Ibrahim of Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol, in 2008,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* wrote. “Patrons of Ibrahim’s local mosque ... alerted the authorities after noticing suspicious burns to his hands and feet. It turned out that he had had an accident handling peroxide-based explosives for a planned suicide bombing.”

Assisting Russia

The Russian Olympic organizers hosting the Sochi Winter Games in 2014 will likely learn from the British experience. Violent post-Soviet separatist movements based in the Caucasus have claimed credit for many acts of terrorism, including the 2011 bombing at Domodedovo airport in Moscow. Reuters reported that Caucasus terrorists have threatened to take their lethal campaign to the “Russian heartland” and have “leveled threats at the 2014 Winter Olympics, scheduled for the Black Sea resort town of Sochi, a region some militants consider ‘occupied.’”



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British police officers conduct a search exercise at the Olympic Stadium in London, part of the preparations for the 2012 Summer Olympics.

The need for British-Russian security cooperation was made clear in a September 2011 visit to Moscow by British Prime Minister David Cameron. In fact, information sharing between past and future host countries has become an Olympic tradition. The Chinese hosts of the Beijing Olympics of 2008 learned about security from the Greek hosts of the Athens Olympics of 2004. As it prepares to hand off the Olympic torch to Britain, China has shared some know-how. “Of course, Britain and Russia are both hosting the next Summer and Winter Olympic Games, so I’m sure we’ll be working together on those,” the prime minister said. “I hope we can share experience of running a successful London 2012 to help Russian preparations for the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014.” □