

In Asia :

New Olympic republics

The Soviet break-up has unleashed new forces seeking Olympic gold but the cash shortage poses a threat to the proud tradition of excellence. On the old silk route, accompanying the IOC president, David Miller, chief sports writer of the London 'Times' reports on the situation of sport in the Republics of the former Soviet Union.



After a meeting with the NOC, President Juan Antonio Samaranch, with Mr Islam Karimov, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan presents the IOC pin to the young Olympic champion Lina Tcherjazova, who won gold in freestyle skiing in Lillehammer.

(Below) Meeting with the NOC of Israël during the IOC President's visit to Tel Aviv for the final of the European basketball championships.

It is a sobering prospect that, by this time next year, Britain may have a lower Davis Cup ranking than Uzbekistan. Than who, you may ask? In spite of acute financial hardship being experienced by most of the newly independent states, sport is on the move all along the ancient silk route to China, through Baku, Tashkent and Alma Ata. "People suppose the Soviet breakup will make it easier for other nations," Samaranch says. "The opposite is true: there are now a dozen new countries with -potential medal winners." Uzbekistan is the most developed of the five repub-

After a brief stop in Slovenia on the occasion of the NOC's general assemble and a meeting with the President of the Republic, Mr Milan Kucan from 12th to 23rd April, the IOC President went to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and Israel. The president led a delegation which included Messrs Mario Vazquez Rana, ANOC president and Jacques Rogge, president, of AENOC



lics east of the Caspian, though all are wealthy in national resources. Uzbekistan's name dates back to Uzbeg Khan, a chief of the Golden Horde, who introduced Islam in the 14th century, though the population is a blend of Mongol, Turk, Afghan, Jew and Russian; Tashkent, a huge rambling capital of wide boulevards and two million people was initially a candidate to host the Olympic Games of 2000. "We withdrew because of the border war with Tajikistan," Sobir Ruziev, a former fencing world champion and sports minister, said. "Now we think it better to develop step by step." Uzbekistan contributed 17 competitors to the CIS team at Barcelona and won three gold medals, two silver and a bronze.

NEW OBJECTIVES

In meetings with the five republic heads of state and National Olympic Committees, Samaranch encouraged two immediate strategies: the separation of the function of sports ministry and Olympic Committee between mass sport and elite sport-all are still geared to the old Soviet system of ministry-directed sport, with nominal Olympic representation - and the establishment of a quadrennial Cen-



Kazakhstan: arriva1 at Alma Ata. The NOC officials welcome President Samaranch.

tral Asian Games from next year. Evidence from the visit revealed that Tashkent is far from ready for the Olympic event, even if staging some events at historic, fairytale Samarkand, from where Tamerlane ruled an empire that stretched from the Volga to the Ganges. Samaranch's visit coincided with a central Asian football tournament and a tennis tournament being supervised by Gene Scott, a former US Davis Cup player who directs the Kremlin Cup in Moscow. A \$40 million tennis complex has just been completed, and if Uzbekistan win their zonal group two, and Britain lose to Romania in July, Uzbekistan will have a higher status. More than 30 per cent of sports facilities are being privatised. The Kazaks are a people of remarkable fortitude, ambitious to stage the winter Olympics of 2006. Alma Ata (Father Apple) is situated beneath Mount

Alatau, site of the world's highest natural outdoor winter arena. with a unique combination of the quality of air and mountain water plus an altitude of 6,000 feet, 140 world records have been broken in 20 years, but recent poor maintenance means the venue cannot compete with more modern sites. The national fortitude stems from enduring ferocious winter and summer seasons, exemplified by the Nordic marathon victory of Vladimir Smimov in Lillehammer, Kazakhstan's first Olympic medal.

A SINGLE ATHLETE IN LILLEHAMMER

Kyrgyzstan is the poorest of the five eastern republics, its plight worsened by an appalling winter in which thousands died. Descended from nomadic, horse breeding Mongols, the Kirghis are first recorded in the fifth century and today they have one of the foremost institutes of physical culture, with 1200 students, almost 50 per cent coming from Russia or



Visit of the sports venues at the Institute of Physical Culture in Bishkek the capital of Kyrgyzstan, before meeting the sports leaders.



Ukraine. In 40 years of Soviet Olympic participation, the institute produced 42 champions, and 800 Masters of Sport. Their halls have that severe, Spartan feel that is synonymous with breeding excellence, the leathery smell of inspiration. Yet the Olympic Committee, financially struggling under the dedicated leadership of Eshim Koutmanaliev - for 23 years the institute's president - could afford to send only one competitor to the Lillehammer Games. The government was asked for a \$30,000 one-year budget; it granted \$2,687! Like other small nations, Kyrgyzstan struggles to meet international federation membership fees, cannot attend seminars, and loses its best footballers/basketballers to foreign teams. Tajikistan, impoverished by border wars, attempts to earn foreign currency by selling water from the snows of its extensive mountains to Arab nations, and unwanted Aeroflot planes left behind by the Soviet regime. Sport lives hand to mouth at nearly 100 sports schools. Andoz Abdvalliev won the hammer at the Barcelona Olympics for the CIS team, and four others finished in the top six. A visit to Dushanbe's tennis school revealed many 12-year-olds of exceptional talent. Samaranch promised two overseas scholarships. The last stop before



Judo training in Dushanbe in Tajikistan, presented by NOC president Mr Hasanov.

Presentation of the 2 Olympic pins by the NOC president in Ashkhabad in Turkmenistan.



moving to the Caucasus was Ashkhabad, Turkmenistan, home of some of the world's greatest weightlifters. In the recent world championships in Australia, Turkmenistan won ten gold medals, 25 silver and bronze. It is a country rich in natural gas, oil and cotton, but has many debtor neighbours. A team of 50 will be sent to the Asian Games at Hiroshima in October. Samaranch gave the same advice as to the others: concentrate forces for the moment on small teams from the stronger sports. He offered two study scholarships.

CULTURES AND TRADITION

The three nations of the Caucasus - Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan - have, over the centuries, represented a phenomenon of mankind. They have possessed many of the world's foremost intellects - philosophers, musicians, scientists, writers and chess players - and simultaneously people of exceptional physical capabilities. The Georgians, a kingdom for 2000 years of Roman, Hellenic and Persian culture, and Armenians and Azerbaijans, descended from

the Hittites, Babylonians and Islamic traditions, collectively contributed 22 competitors to the disintegrating Soviet Union's "CIS" team at the Olympic Games in Barcelona in 1992. They won, between them, nine gold medals, one silver and six bronze in eight sports. Armenia has discovered two Olympic champions from the Ancient Greek games. The names of Tardat Archakuny and Varazdat Archakuny, respectively a wrestler and boxer from 281 and 385AD, were found engraved on stone in Greece. The CIS's two 1992 medals in gymnastics were won by Georgians. At the National School of Dance in Tbilisi, the delegation headed by Juan Antonio Samaranch, the president of the International Olympic Committee, witnessed the highlight of his tour covering eight countries in eight days - a 45-minute performance by 12-year-old of agility, discipline and bravura,

TSAGHRADZOR'S MULTISPORTS COMPLEX

Yet the Caucasus republics, like the rest of the former Soviet empire, have problems. It is impossible, for instance, to telephone to Western Europe even from the private residence of Eduard Shevardnadze, the Georgian leader. Yerevan, the Armenian capital, spends the night in the dark. The nuclear generator is temporarily closed down and the country has four hours electricity a day. Yet, 40 miles from Yerevan, set in the Ararat mountain range, lies the multi-sports complex of Tsaghkadzor, a unique train-

ing centre at 6000 feet for 47 disciplines of winter and summer sports, where 85 per cent of the former Soviet Olympic teams were sent for preparation. "This was surely one of the secrets of the USSR success", Samaranch explained, but Tsaghkadzor, with the Armenian sports ministry and National Olympic Committee (NOC) unable to maintain, unaided, its upkeep, is rapidly falling into disrepair. The swimming pools lie empty and gungy, the three tartan tracks are peeling, the three-ringed boxing gymnasium is stale and damp. "You have here one of the best sports centres in the world and we must try to help you update it", Samaranch promised, giving the NOC an immediate cheque for \$7,500 towards essential repairs - domestically worth 200 times as much at the present rate of exchange - and a further \$15,000 towards international federation membership fees. Fortunately for Yerevan, the impressive 75000 capacity stadium of Ararat Yerevan FC, the former Soviet champions, is in good repair for their forthcoming inaugural entry in the European championship qualifying round, but, in the empire's dissolution, Armenia lost 20 players to foreign clubs and is unsure of their release for the national team. Fully intact is the elaborate marble and



The multisport complex in Tsaghkadzor, a unique centre where the Soviet athletes used to train, is falling into disrepair.

glass indoor sports and concert hall, built by the Soviets in 1982 at exorbitant cost, inhibitive for any country today bar China. Professor Raphael Toroyan, the sports minister, could tell many tales, some perhaps unpublishable: for 20 years, he was both physiologist and psychiatrist to the Soviet Olympic team.

SPORT MOTIVATES HALF THE COUNTRY



A little sport on the track of the stadium in Yerevan. Meeting with the wrestlers in Azerbaïdjan Olympic souvenirs.

In Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, we had dinner in a 12th-century hotel where you could resuscitate your camel. For contemporary travellers, it is difficult to find a late-night watering hole. Maguiatdin Allakhverdiev - at 29, the youngest of all National Olympic Committee chairmen - and I notably failed; instead, boundless 'with enthusiasm, he took me on a 'midnight tour, illuminated only by the stars, of Baku's resplendent but largely unused sports facilities. Allakhverdiev was three times the freestyle world wrestling champion and retired in disgust, a national hero, when he finished fourth at the Olympics in Seoul in 1988. The country is traditionally strong at his sport, boxing and judo, but is financially crippled by the six-year war with Armenia over the disputed enclave of Nagomo-Karabakh, a short distance inside their border, where most of the inhabitants are Armenians. A million

refugees are housed in Baku - many filling the sports institute. Azerbaijan was traditionally the centre for Soviet rowing training. In Georgia, where there are 26 rugby clubs, 3000 players and they have twice beaten Zimbabwe, the eager expectation is for their first entry into the European football championship, in which they are drawn with Germany, Bulgaria, Wales, Albania and Moldavia. A tough one. But as Mr Shevardnadze said to Samaranch "Half the country is motivated by sport". In the 40 years from 1952 Georgia supplied 143 Soviet Olympic competitors - and won 31 gold medals, 22 silver and 39 bronze, notwithstanding that the main sport is chess, in which Nona Gaprindashvili, the NOC chairwoman, won five con-

secutive world championships. Some woman, some country.

DAVID MILLER

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In Georgia, meeting with a remarkable woman: Mrs Nona Gaprindashvili, former world checks champion, NOC president, here with Messrs Jacques Rogge and Mario Vazquez Rana on his right.

