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Olympics will go on, with added security

By Linda Robertson
Knight Ridder Newspapers

SALT LAKE CITY (KRT) — A lack of snow used to be the biggest worry gnawing at organizers of the Winter Olympics. But now, six weeks after the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., and 109 days before the 2002 opening ceremonies, concern about security has superseded all other preparation issues.

Fear that the Salt Lake City Games could be the target of terrorism will alter the ambience of the event. Metal detectors will be everywhere — even at the entrances to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints' Temple Square downtown. Surveillance cameras, National Guardsmen and plainclothes Secret Service agents will be watching spectators. Miles of fencing will mar the landscape. Even the stuffed animals fans bring to the figure skating venue to toss upon the ice will be scrutinized. The five interlocking Olympic rings may start to resemble loops of razor wire.

But one thing is certain, according to Olympic leaders: The Games will go on. Postponing, canceling or moving the Games are not options.

"The Olympics have to go forward," said Salt Lake Organizing Committee president Mitt Romney. "You proceed with the Games almost regardless of the turbulence. There is no good contingency worth considering."

In fact, Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt said the state won't purchase additional event cancellation insurance. Its \$150 million policy covers only a fraction of the money invested in the Games.

International Olympic Committee president Jacques Rogge hasn't altered his plan to stay in the athletes village, which he said will be "the most secure place in the world" during the Feb. 8-24 Games.

"The Olympics is an answer to the present violence and should not be a victim of violence," Rogge said. "I don't know what we do for humanity if we were to cancel the Games."

World Wars have previously been the only cause of cancellation — in 1916, 1940 and 1944. The Games have gone on despite other conflicts, such as in Korea and Vietnam, and Soviet invasions of Hungary and Afghanistan.

"There is no parallel for the present situation," said John MacAloon, a professor of social

sciences at the University of Chicago and an expert on the history and politics of the Olympics. "Technically speaking, we are not a country at war. I don't think the overriding issue is the security of the Games themselves, but whether the world will be secure enough in February for teams to feel comfortable about traveling."

Romney said he has received 200 letters from international Olympic officials in support of the Games.

He is also confident that the \$270 million security plan — strengthened Thursday by a pledge of an additional \$24.5 million from the \$40 billion congressional anti-terrorism fund — will make the venues and the skies above them safe for athletes and spectators.

A new restriction that has been proposed would ground all flights out of local airports during the opening ceremonies, which President Bush is expected to attend.

"There's a wide range of restrictive actions you can take when you know precisely when and where an event is taking place," Romney said.

American athletes said they don't feel they'll be in danger when they compete here.

"I went to the in-line skating world championships in Colombia in 1993 and armed guards escorted us to the arena, which was full of guards with machine guns," said speedskater Derek Parra. "But once I got on the track I didn't even notice them. I was focused on my race."

During a recent training trip to Europe, skier Picabo Street heard European skiers discussing the risks of traveling to and within the U.S.

"Some competitors were fairly adamant about not coming here," she said. "I think they are paranoid to come here for training or for the Olympics. But they're not going to skip the Olympics."

Street said the attacks have made her more "paranoid" about airplanes, but also more resolute about racing.

"It's definitely made travel kind of scary and interesting," she said. "By competing, I get my chance to give America something back because it's been kind of bleak the last month and a half."

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