

Beijing marathoners don face masks to battle smog

By Louise Watt

The Associated Press

BEIJING — Despite heavy pollution blanketing Beijing, an international marathon went ahead, with face masks and sponges among the equipment used by competitors to battle the smog.

The 34th Beijing International Marathon began at Tiananmen Square with many of the tens of thousands of participants wearing face masks. The 26-mile course ended at the Chinese capital's Olympic Park, on a day when buildings across the city disappeared into the gray-tinged mist.

"Actually, on a normal day, nobody would run in such conditions," said participant Liu Zhenyu, a computer engineer. "But the event is happening today, so what can we do?"

About 30,000 people reportedly took part in the marathon and the half-marathon. The organizing committee made 140,000 sponges available at supply stations along the marathon route so runners could "clean their skin that is exposed to the air," the *Beijing News* reported.

The men's and women's marathon winners were both from Ethiopia. Girmay Birhanu Gebru won the men's race in 2 hours, 10 minutes, 42 seconds, while



Fatuma Sado Dergo won the women's in 2 hours, 30 minutes, 3 seconds.

"... the smog did have a little impact on my performance, but not a major one," said China's Gong Lihua, who came in third in the women's race.

An update the night before the race on the official microblog of the marathon, which was hosted by the Chinese Athletic Association and the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Sports, said "there might be

slight or moderate smog." It asked competitors to take measures according to their own health, and advised the elderly and people with respiratory diseases to carefully consider whether to participate.

But the air was deemed severely polluted, according to the real-time monitoring of Beijing's environmental center. It was the most serious level on China's air quality index, and came with a warning for children, the elderly, and the

SEVERE SMOG. A runner wearing a mask to protect herself from pollutants looks at her smartphone while others jog along Chang'an Avenue near Tiananmen Square, which was shrouded in haze at the start of the 2014 Beijing International Marathon in Beijing, China. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

sick to stay indoors, and for everyone to avoid outdoor activities.

The U.S. Embassy, which tracks the Beijing air from a monitoring station on its roof and uses a different air quality index, said the air was hazardous. It gave a reading of 344 micrograms per cubic meter of PM2.5 particulate matter. The World Health Organization considers 25 micrograms within a 24-hour period a safe level.

The night before the race, the marathon's organizing committee said that postponing the event would be difficult because of all the planning that had gone into it, and asked competitors to understand, the *Beijing News* reported. It said 46 percent of the competitors had travelled from abroad and other parts of China to take part.

China's pollution is notorious following years of rapid economic development. Combatting the problem has shot up the agenda of the ruling Communist Party, which is under pressure from citizens who are tired of breathing in smog.

Associated Press videojournalist Li Zhaobin contributed to this report.

Joko Widodo sworn in as Indonesia's new president

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democratic consolidation and a focused fight against Islamist militancy. But economic growth on the back of a commodities boom has slowed, and a recovery is being hampered by weak infrastructure, rampant corruption, and

red tape.

Widodo is targeting seven percent growth in the coming years. To get close to that, he will need bold reforms to attract foreign investment, as well as favorable external conditions. A looming problem is expected hikes next year in what are

record-low U.S. interest rates, which could suck funds from the country, pressurizing the rupiah and spooking the markets.

Economists say Widodo must soon decide how much to cut subsidies on fuel that unless trimmed will cost the government a budget-busting \$30 billion-plus this year. The move will likely stoke protests from political opponents and could trigger street demonstrations.

He also can expect resistance from opposition parties still smarting from the election defeat of their candidate, Prabowo Subianto. The coalition against Widodo already has captured most of the important positions in parliament and also voted to end direct regional elections, a key plank of the country's democratic transition since Suharto was ousted in 1998.

Subianto attended the inauguration ceremony and met with Widodo to offer qualified support for his administration.

Much uncertainty remains over how effective Widodo will be in negotiating

with the opposition, and how much of a disruptive role it will play. Subianto's initial refusal to accept the election results and the comments of some of his supporters led to speculation among analysts that he would seek to topple Widodo midterm.

In his inauguration speech, Widodo pledged to maintain the country's "free and active" foreign policy, a stance that has seen it slowly taking up more of a leadership role in Southeast Asia. Working to stop the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria, managing relations with China, and keeping often testy ties with Australia on an even keel will be key tasks.

"I'm very encouraged by everything that President Jokowi has said up until now. He's obviously a charismatic and inspirational figure," said Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who flew to Jakarta for the ceremony. "I think there's a wave of confidence and renewal sweeping Indonesia right now."



ANNUAL TRIP. A camel herder stands beside resting camels at the cattle fair in Pushkar, in the desert state of Rajasthan in western India. Hundreds of thousands of camels, horses, and cattle from all over northern and western India are bought and sold at the annual fair in the town 200 miles southwest of New Delhi. Hindus come during the fair to take a dip in Pushkar Lake, which they believe washes away their sins. They also offer prayers to the god Bramha — who Hindus believe created the universe. Pushkar is home to the only temple where he is worshipped. This photo is part of The AP's "Images of Asia" series. (AP Photo/Deepak Sharma)

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