**Paris Olympics-2024: Games Wide Open**

[Qamar Bashir](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/qamar-bashir/)

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I was posted in France as Press Minister in September 2016, and I had the unique opportunity to witness France being awarded the hosting rights for the 2024 Summer Olympics on September 13, 2017, during the 131st IOC Session in Lima, Peru. From that pivotal moment until our return to Pakistan after four years, we experienced firsthand the dynamic and transformative efforts of the French National Olympic management committee to turn the historic city of Paris into a vibrant Olympic city. The meticulous planning and extensive preparations were aimed at hosting 32 sports with 329 events. This unique ceremony, set against the picturesque backdrop of the Seine River and Parisian landmarks, promises to deliver an unforgettable experience unlike any other in Olympic history.

What we did not anticipate, however, was a sabotage attack in Paris that shocked the world as it targeted key infrastructure and disrupted planned events. The coordinated attack involved multiple explosive devices planted along the Seine River, where the historic ceremony was set to take place. The incident caused significant damage to several bridges and disrupted the transportation network, creating chaos and widespread panic among spectators and participants. Fortunately, emergency services, already on high alert and prepared for any emergency, responded swiftly to contain the situation, prevent further damage, and ensure the safety of the public.

Despite the attack casting a shadow over the opening ceremony, it failed to dampen the enthusiasm, anticipation, and excitement for the highly awaited, glittering event. The ceremony, with its delicate and romantic French touch, proceeded and left an indelible mark on the hearts of those present and the millions watching worldwide.

When countries, races, and languages unite, they create a powerful force of positive energy, love, friendship, and tolerance.

During our four-year sojourn in Paris, the highlight was walking along the majestic River Seine. We enjoyed the frequent boat rides, feeling the cold breeze on our faces while watching tourists of all colours, races, ethnicities, and languages throng the Seine banks. They were revealed in music, dance, and various games along the riverbanks. Little did we know that after four years, the Seine would be adorned with a majestic Olympic ceremony, featuring athletes parading on boats past iconic landmarks like the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame. Lined on both sides, 300,000 spectators will witness this event live, with a diverse array of cultural performances directed by Thomas Jolly.

These preparations, though impactful, added much excitement and dynamism to our sojourn in Paris from 2016 to 2020. Road closures, street upliftings, metro refurbishments, and river water cleaning and filtering were all part of the grand effort to get the city ready for the Olympics. The construction of new venues, such as the Paris Aquatics Centre and the Olympic and Paralympic Village in Saint-Denis, alongside the renovation of existing sites like Stade de France, were significant milestones.

We also witnessed the construction of temporary structures for events like beach volleyball at the Eiffel Tower and archery at Les Invalides, showcasing a commitment to minimizing long-term environmental impacts. Transportation upgrades, including the commencement of the Grand Paris Express project to extend and modernize the metro system, and the enhancement of existing public transport services like the metro, RER, tram, and bus networks, ensured efficient and sustainable travel for athletes, officials, and spectators. These developments transformed Paris into a vibrant Olympic city, reflecting the meticulous planning and effort behind the scenes.

The opening ceremony was held at 10:30 PM last night, and our entire family was glued to the TV to watch. Ninety-four boats carrying 200 delegations, mostly clad in their national dresses, paraded down the Seine River, waving flags, bunting, and hands under the dazzling lights and fireworks. The event took place under the watchful eyes of 45,000 police personnel and a contingent of 10,000 army troops, with strict security protocols bolstered by AI-powered high-definition video surveillance.

The hallmark of the Paris 2024 Olympics was a spectacular procession that began at the Austerlitz Bridge and travelled six kilometres, with 10,500 athletes representing 206 nations on boats passing iconic landmarks like Notre Dame, the Louvre, and the Pont Alexandre III. Spectators enjoyed performances from 3,000 artists and 400 dancers stationed on bridges, creating a festive atmosphere. The ceremony culminated at the Trocadéro, across from the Eiffel Tower, where the Olympic cauldron was lit, highlighting Paris’s beauty and history in a memorable start to the Games.

The parade was enhanced by stunning singing and dance performances featuring Kelly Clarkson. A Grammy-winning artist, Clarkson brought her vibrant energy and powerful voice to the event, marking her first time hosting an Olympic broadcast. Their performance captivated the spectators, adding an unforgettable experience to the already spectacular opening ceremony.

The hosting of Olympics-2024 Paris gave the unique honour of hosting the Olympic Games three times. The first time was during the 1900 Summer Olympics, which marked the first occasion Paris hosted the Games. Paris hosted the Olympics for the second time in 1924. Now, in 2024, Paris will have the distinction of hosting the Olympic Games for the third time.

The ceremony culminated in a spectacular display of fireworks that turned night into day, filling the hearts and souls of the spectators. This heartwarming show was a testament to shared humanity, diversity, and unity, reflecting the spirit of sportsmanship and the gathering of nations from across the globe. Athletes from diverse cultures, languages, and backgrounds came together to showcase human resilience and shared objectives. The city of Paris was filled with a rich tapestry of cultures and colours, celebrating equality and upholding human values. Setting aside bilateral and multilateral disputes, conflicts, and wars, the event demonstrated that when countries, races, and languages unite, they create a powerful force of positive energy, love, friendship, and tolerance. These athletes conveyed a message to the world that working in harmony, supporting one another, and caring for each other can lead to peace, allowing us to realize our full potential and share our riches and wealth to make the world a better place for everyone, regardless of means.

*The writer is a former press secretary to the president; former press minister to the Embassy of Pakistan to France and former MD (SRBC).*