

Star-studded cast to watch Games begin

By JUDITH EVANS in London
Agence France-Presse

Thousands of VIPs, including about 120 national leaders, will jet into London for Friday's Olympic opening ceremony, with guests ranging from Angelina Jolie and Michelle Obama to the king of Swaziland.

The expected record number of heads of state and governments will watch the Olympic cauldron lit by a mystery personality in a \$42 million extravaganza of music, dancing and pyrotechnics, amid a flurry of A-list parties in the British capital.

Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda are among the leaders set to attend what will be a suitably British and eccentric show, featuring live sheep and dancing surgeons from the National Health Service.

Britain's 86-year-old monarch Queen Elizabeth II will officially open the Games at the ceremony, whose exact contents are a secret — but which is also said to include a scene in which magical fictional nanny Mary Poppins vanquishes Harry Potter villain Lord Voldemort.

First Lady Michelle Obama will head the US delegation, and while there are no plans for her husband President Barack Obama to attend, his electoral rival Mitt Romney will be in the crowd wooing foreign leaders ahead of November's election.

Britain's Prince William and his wife Catherine, credited with breathing new life into the country's monarchy, will appear along with a flock of European royals including Prince Albert of Monaco.

Russia's delegation will be led by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, while President Vladimir Putin has indicated he may fly in later purely to watch the judo, in which he is himself a black belt.

British soccer legend David Beckham is expected to appear at the ceremony despite not being selected for Team GB — his non-selection drew public anger.

The contingent of heads of state and governments, which the Foreign Office says will peak at about 120 for the ceremony, outstrips about 80 who attended the Beijing ceremony in 2008 and about half that number in Athens four years earlier.

They will also be invited to a reception at Buckingham Palace beforehand.

But even glitzier will be the series of celebrity parties taking place around the fringes of the Games, above all a charity gala at the Victoria and Albert Museum on Wednesday in aid of Sports for Peace, honoring boxing great Muhammad Ali.

Hollywood mega-couple Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt are helping host the soiree, leading it to be dubbed "Brangelina's party" by British newspapers agog with the influx of stars.

"Royalty meets Hollywood as star-studded Games party season starts," gushed the London Evening Standard on Monday.

According to the Times newspaper, that party will also feature actress Catherine Zeta Jones, racing driver Lewis Hamilton and Ukrainian boxing duo the Klitschko brothers. But the food was to be down-to-earth, including the British classic fish and chips.

The watch brand Omega will host a series of "secret" parties during the Games, with invitees including Australian actress Nicole Kidman, a face of the brand, and US swimming multiple gold medal-winner Michael Phelps.

Several super-yachts, favored by tycoons, are meanwhile moored off the Canary Wharf business district.

There will, however, be notable absences as the Games begin — not least leaders such as Syria's Bashar al-Assad, who along with Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe and Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus is subject to a European travel ban.

Other Syrians, including Olympic committee chief General Mowaffak Joumaa, are staying away after London said it would deny entry to people shown to be linked to rights abuses.

But Syria's 10-strong Games team will still compete despite the civil war there.

A visit from Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad looks in doubt, after he said he believed Britain had a "problem" with his presence. His country is involved in a high-stakes nuclear standoff with the West.

Swazi King Mswati III is set to attend despite protests against his presence at May celebrations for Queen Elizabeth II's jubilee by compatriots who say he leads a lavish lifestyle at the expense of his impoverished subjects.



A FLIPPING GOOD SHOW

PHOTO BY LEE JIN-MAN / ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Chinese women's synchronized team rehearses at the Aquatics Centre at the Olympic Park ahead of the Olympics on Tuesday in London.

Flag: China pins hopes on top athletes

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Many are also giving odds on Beijing Olympic men's badminton gold medalist Lin Dan.

The 28-year-old is the first and only player to win all nine major titles in world badminton, including the Olympic Games, World Championships and All-England Open.

But the Games' badminton competitions will kick off on the first match day, and the Chinese badminton team's head coach Li Yongbo, said Lin might forfeit the honor to ensure he's competitive during the matches.

"It is certainly a great honor for every Chinese athlete to carry the national flag and lead the Chinese delegation to the Olympic stadium (for the Games' opening ceremony)," Li said.

"It's also an honor for the badminton team if Lin takes the role. But it may affect his performance the next day, so I don't want him to do it. It's regrettable. But, as head coach, I must make performance priority No 1."

Tennis superstar Li Na also

plays the following day.

Li Na won the French Open last year and became the first player from an Asian country to win a Grand Slam in singles.

She would become China's first woman athlete to carry the flag at an Olympic opening ceremony. Media have reported China's tennis chief Sun Jinfang indicated Li Na may skip the opening ceremony to

prepare for the matches.

Chinese hurdler Liu Xiang is also expected to skip the ceremony. Media report the 2004 Olympic champion will keep training in Germany until early August. The 110m hurdles will start on Aug 7.

Liu shot to fame after winning China's first Olympic gold medal in a men's track and field event at the Athens Games.

His homeland expected him to repeat the victory on home soil during the 2008 Beijing Games, but an injury forced his withdrawal.

Concerns persist about the 29-year-old's risk of re-injury, since he pulled out of the Diamond League London Grand Prix final on July 14.

Chinese swimmer Sun Yang, who broke the world record in

the 1,500m freestyle at the 2011 World Championship, is another prospect. But the 20-year-old might need more time to become celebrated enough to be honored as the Chinese delegation's flag bearer.

Contact the writer at tangzhe@chinadaily.com.cn

Reuters contributed to the story.

WHO ELSE?

SWITZERLAND

Wawrinka will take over for Federer

Stanislas Wawrinka will carry the Swiss flag at Friday's Olympic Games opening ceremony, taking over from 2008 gold medal winning teammate Roger Federer, who performed the duty in Athens and Beijing.

Wawrinka, the world No 26, won doubles gold with Federer four years ago.

"Thank you for giving me the honor of carrying the Swiss flag. It's a moment of immense pride for me," the 27-year-old said on Twitter.

BRITAIN

Cyclist Chris Hoy to carry British flag

Sir Chris Hoy will carry

Novak Djokovic will lead the Serbia team, Maria Sharapova will carry the Russian flag, and Wimbledon runner-up Agnieszka Radwanska has the honor for Poland.

Defending men's champion Rafael Nadal had been due to be Spain's flag bearer, but he has pulled out with injury.

Britain's flag at the opening ceremony, the four-time Olympic champion confirmed on Monday.

"I'm absolutely delighted and honored to have been voted as the flag bearer for Team GB," said the 36-year-old cyclist.

"To lead out your team at a home Olympics is truly a once in a lifetime opportunity and one that I can't wait to experience in just a few days time."

Hoy also carried the Union Jack at the closing ceremony in Beijing four years ago.

The Scot is one of Britain's most successful Olympians, having won four gold medals, including

three in Beijing in 2008.

Brian Cookson, the president of British Cycling, told the BBC: "It's absolutely fantastic news. Sir Chris is a brilliant athlete and a fantastic ambassador for the sport of cycling."

"Just when you think it can't get any better, it does — it is the cherry on the cake for British Cycling after Bradley Wiggins' success in the Tour de France on Sunday."

"Hoy is reaching his potential just at the right time in the sport and deserves this pivotal role at London 2012."

AFP



SECURITY SUPPORT

PHOTO BY LEFERIS PITARAKIS / ASSOCIATED PRESS

British armed personnel at the Olympic Park on Tuesday in London. Britain has deployed 1,200 more soldiers to secure the Olympics as embarrassed organizers scrambled to fill a shortfall left by a private firm hired to guard the Games just three days before the opening ceremony.

Guangzhou fans lead national cheer squad

By HE DAN

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More than half of urban respondents in China said they are interested in the 2012 London Olympic Games, according to a survey China Daily obtained on Monday.

Residents in Guangzhou, capital of Guangdong province, are the most enthusiastic about the London Olympics. About 75 percent of those polled in Guangzhou said they have paid close attention to the Games. That's about 15 percentage points higher than the national average.

The survey was conducted by Horizon Research and Horizonkey, which is based in Beijing.

More than 3,100 residents in

10 Chinese cities, including Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, were polled.

Respondents said they were most excited about the opening ceremony, followed by the sports events and relays.

Urbanites who are younger than 40 are more interested in the Games. About 64 percent of people aged 18-39 said the Games interested them, while only half of those 40-60 said so.

Seven in 10 male respondents said they have kept a close eye on the London Olympics.

Liu Guang, a 26-year-old Guangzhou resident, said he cannot wait to watch the Games.

"I'm curious about whether Liu Xiang can make it to the 110m hurdles and what his performance will be like," he said.



It is too expensive to visit Britain during the Olympic Games because the cost is about 30 percent, or even 40 percent, higher than usual."

LI MENG
DEPUTY GENERAL MANAGER OF THE CHINA INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL SERVICE'S OUTBOUND TRAVEL DEPARTMENT

"And I bet the US men's basketball team will be the cham-

pion again."

About 2 percent of those surveyed said they will travel to London for the Olympics.

Caissa International Travel Service is the sole authorized ticket retailer of the London Olympic Games on the Chinese mainland.

Caissa's president Chen Xiaobing said the London Organizing Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games has distributed 18,000 tickets to the Chinese mainland. His agency bought 2,000 additional tickets through other sources, including Prestige Ticketing, according to a news release on the agency's website on Friday.

Badminton, basketball and track and field are the most attractive events for Chinese

tourists, he said, adding that there are about 3,000 tickets remaining.

Other travel agencies in China prefer organizing travel tours to Britain, including visiting the Olympic venues after, rather than during, the Games.

"It is too expensive to visit Britain during the Olympic Games because the cost is about 30 percent, or even 40 percent, higher than usual," said Li Meng, deputy general manager of the China International Travel Service's outbound travel department.

He said the expense during the Games discouraged most Chinese tourists.

The agency normally charges \$3,130 for a nine-day trip from China to Britain, he said.