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### Skiing minnows feel gulf in wealth in France

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Val d'Isere, France: The world economic crisis seems to have given a wide berth to the majority of people gathered in the chic French alpine resort of Val d'Isere for the World Ski Championships.

As people around the globe struggle with mortgage payments and even a weekly food shop, cafes here can still charge 16 euros for a toasted ham-and-cheese sandwich and realtors can shamelessly ask for a bid in excess of 300,000 euros for a tiny three-room apartment.

The cafes, needless to say, are full and the real estate market booming. Although skiing as a recreation has become increasingly accessible for millions of people worldwide, the sport remains an expensive one, notably in traditional European resorts. For the two-week championships here, the evidence of wealth is everywhere. Sponsors, vital to the continuation of competitive skiing events, dot their tents, hot-air balloons and shiny brand-new cars around the piste. The big skiing nations such as Austria, France, Italy and Switzerland have taken over hotels and throw free-for-all parties each night for those lucky enough to have bagged an entry pass.

It was at a sponsor's party, ironically, that American double gold medallist Lindsey Vonn sliced her thumb on the top of a champagne bottle - opened, rather decadently some would argue, with the edge of a ski. But amid the deluxe boutiques in the quaint old village, there are a number of ski teams from four corners of the world struggling even to kit themselves out and find the cents for lunch. In Thursday's giant slalom races, a handful of Iranians lined up alongside ski racers from India, Mongolia, Ireland, Mexico, Israel, Brazil and Colombia, just some of the 73 nations who are members of the International Ski Federation (FIS).

Their story is vastly different from the teams from the traditional cluster of European nations, Canada and the United States. Take 37-year-old Mongolian Changaa Bayarzul, for example. He has local ski instructor Jean-Luc Fabares to thank for kitting him out with two pairs of skis that conform to strict FIS regulations.

Bayarzul finished 61st and last out of the 102 starters in the men's GS qualification, the top 25 of whom win the right to compete in yesterday's giant slalom proper.

The Mongolian was a massive 105.41sec adrift of winner Alexandr Horoshilova of Russia in the race that took place on the 'OK' slope, a bus ride away from the Belvedere piste that will be used for the main event. Some of the skiers wore black armbands in protest at what they perceived as their belittling treatment by FIS. "We're wearing this armband because we're in mourning," said Belgian Jeroen Van Den Bogaert. "The championships are dying. These are the world championships, not the championships of the Alps."

FIS president Gian Franco Kasper, however, was gruff in rebuffing any complaint of maltreatment. "When the spectators ski better than the skiers, then there's nothing you can do," he said.

Farid Ebrahimi Nejad, of the Iranian skiing delegation, countered that while their needs were half financed by the government, freight costs to France were too costly for the team to transport their own skis, so they had to rent them locally instead.

Richard Morley, who shot to prominence in his native Britain over his troubled application to adopt his son Jayaram Khadka, has been coach of the Nepal ski team for 10 years and said the gulf between nations was gaping.

"The Nepal ski team is probably the world's poorest ski team from the world's poorest country," Morley said of his three-strong team which is based in the neighbouring Les Arcs resort.

"Every nation has to compete in the world championships this year in order to qualify for the Olympics," he said.

"Plainly, the third world skiers don't really have a chance of getting any medals at the world championships. We all know that.

"We have no chance of winning, but we do have chance of getting experience and the skiers have the opportunity of seeing the world at large."