

## Extra Feature Story

### China Restricts Bad Habits and Free Speech Ahead of Olympics

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**The Chinese have been anxiously awaiting the 2008 Olympics since they won the bid to host the games in 2001, but concerns over human rights issues, press freedoms and pollution are threatening to put a dark cloud over the global event.**

Symbols of the games can be seen everywhere in China, on everything from upholstered seats in coach buses, to wine labels and wedding bands. A national television sports station is now dedicated to reporting exclusively on the upcoming event.

The government is hoping to bolster national pride and the international image of the country through the games, but is facing many challenges with just a few months to go.

#### Broken promises

When it applied to host the games, China promised to curb human rights abuses. But recent protests targeting the worldwide Olympic torch relay, in cities like Paris and San Francisco, highlight international discontent with the lack of progress on human rights issues.

According to Amnesty International's annual report, the government increased arrests and surveillance of activists in 2007, while further restricting lawyers.

Last week, activist Yang Chunlin went on trial for obtaining 10,000 signatures on a letter demanding land rights for farmers. He had posted a note on the Internet soliciting support entitled, "We want human rights, not the Olympics."

The Beijing government has also engaged in a city-wide relocation campaign. With unprecedented building construction, tens of thousands of families have been told to move, often with only a few weeks' notice.

For Beijing's historic neighborhoods, the massive makeover meant relocating more than 20,000 families with little or no compensation. Another 2,800 families were moved to make way for Beijing's International Airport addition.

#### Press freedoms

Despite having promised to lift restrictions on the press, China continues to be a leader in imprisonment of journalists. As of December 2007, 29 journalists were in prison.

On the Worldwide Press Freedom Index, China is ranked 163 out of 169 nations – just six spots higher than North Korea and four spots lower than its ranking in 2005, according to the group Reporters Without Borders.

Jan. 1, 2007 marked the first date of an official 22-month long ease in foreign journalist restrictions. Previously, all outside journalists were required to obtain permission from the government for interviews and any reporting trips outside of Beijing.

But foreign and Chinese journalists are still encountering problems. In 2007, reporters were banned from covering events such as deadly coal mining accidents and topics such

as environmental degradation and rural protests against local officials, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

When a report on the sale of steamed dumplings containing cardboard by street vendors in China made it to the international press last July, the Beijing media apologized for the story, claiming it had been fabricated. The reporter was subsequently arrested and sentenced to a year in prison.

The Internet poses even more platforms for media censorship. In 2007, more than 2,500 Web sites were blocked and six bloggers arrested. This year the Chinese government increased Internet censorship of content deemed unpatriotic, inciting violence, or attacking Chinese traditions and culture.

### **Pollution**

The most visible challenge of all is still pollution. In 2001, Beijing claimed it would spend more than \$112 billion to reduce air and water pollution, which can often be five times what the World Health Organization deems safe.

The "Blue Sky Days" campaign includes 27 air pollution meters spaced throughout the city.

As the games approach, there are plans to close several factories in the area and up to 10 percent of Beijing's petrol stations, as well as restrict traffic.

But American and British athletes have still been advised to wear pollution-filtering face masks while not actually competing. Endurance events such as running and cycling may be rescheduled if pollution levels are too high.

### **Breaking habits**

On the cultural front, Beijing officials and dedicated civilians are working to curb what Western visitors may see as discourteous habits -- citizens have been told not to litter, spit, smoke in most public places, cut in line and swear.

The campaign officially began during a national holiday in May of 2007 when officials passed out more than 100,000 paper bags for people to spit into. Authorities also began fining spitters: 89 citizens were charged between 20 yuan (\$2.80) and 50 yuan (\$7) over the week-long holiday.

The 11<sup>th</sup> of every month is now official "Practice Standing in Line Day" because the number resembles two straight lines.

Beijing's official etiquette watchdog, the Capital Ethics Development Office, has asked people in the service industry to take etiquette and English courses.

With only three months left for preparations, the pressure is on. The world will be watching Beijing, and no one is more concerned with that image than China itself.

**-- Compiled by Lauren Knapp for NewsHour Extra**

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