

Extra Feature Story

Olympics Host China Comes Under Fire for Human Rights Concerns

August 5, 2008

As China prepares to open the highly anticipated 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing on August 8, human rights experts are claiming the country has not kept its promise to curb human rights abuses.

When China was awarded the Olympics in 2001, the organizers hoped the spotlight would bring a new openness to the communist country and would help China better integrate into the international community.

China hoped the Olympics would cement its place as a global economic and political power.

"China wants to use the Olympics as a turning point," Yang Bojiang, a Japan scholar at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, told the New York Times.

"It wants to make its society turn into a more mature society...and improve its international image."

Limits on speech and the press

But concerns remain that China has not lived up to its pledge in 2002 to "be open in every aspect," and improve human rights policies such as free speech and press.

While the country was not obligated to sign any contract with the International Olympic Committee saying it would improve press freedoms and human rights, Chinese officials made statements on the issue, including Beijing's mayor, who said during the Olympic selection process that hosting the Olympics would "benefit the further development of our human rights cause."

In a report released by Amnesty International ten days before the start of the games, the organization said "Chinese authorities have broken their promise to improve the country's human rights situation and betrayed the core values of the Olympics."

The group said China continues to imprison peaceful activists and continues to inhibit free reporting by members of the foreign and domestic press.

Dealing with dissent

China has been widely criticized for its tough crackdowns on activists and protesters speaking out against the government.

"They've been actually quite draconian in terms of cracking down on demonstrations in Tibet and some of the leading dissidents have all been jailed prior to the games," said Victor Cha, an Asian studies expert at Georgetown University, in an National Public Radio interview.

When anti-Chinese protests erupted in Tibet in March, the Chinese government responded with force, throwing tear gas into the crowds and arresting protesters. Tibet, located in the southwest corner of China, has been struggling to gain independence from China for 57 years.

The March protests spread into surrounding regions where Chinese forces shot and wounded four protesters.

The crackdown prompted the U.S. House of Representatives to pass a near unanimous resolution calling for immediate action to stop the arrests of civil activists and Tibetans in China. It also called for the country to stop supporting Myanmar and Sudan, two governments facing their own major human rights battles.

Freedom of the Press

Human rights groups also criticize the Chinese government for suppressing information by censoring access to many sites on the internet and attempting to restrict reporting of events or issues that reflect poorly on the government.

PEN, the international writers' organization, accuses China of "a grinding and relentless campaign to jail or silence prominent dissident voices" that has only accelerated as the Olympics near. PEN compiled a list of 44 writers and journalists currently in prison, at least 10 of which were arrested in recent months.

One of the journalists, Hu Jia, was sentenced to three and a half years in prison for disseminating information showing that China was not improving its record on human rights abuses.

PEN also said that "there is also increasing evidence of an organized effort to restrict movement of dissidents and writers to keep them from meeting freely with international observers before and during the Olympics."

Evidence of government censorship was obvious to foreign journalists when they logged on to the Web from the new Olympic press center in Beijing last week. Reporters found they could not access many prominent Web sites, including Reuters, Radio Free Europe and the BBC's China pages.

After a backlash from media groups, China unblocked many of the well-known sites, but the Los Angeles Times reports many lesser known Web sites are still off limits.

The Games go on

Despite all the controversies, IOC President Jacques Rogge said he is not concerned about how the games will be received.

"Come the 9th of August, the day after the opening ceremony, the magic of the games and the flawless organization will take over," Rogge said.

-- **Compiled by Talea Miller for NewsHour Extra**

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