

Olympic Torch Travels A Troubled Path

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(April 8, 2008) The symbolic flame of the Olympic torch is illuminating the long and sordid history of human rights abuses by the People's Republic of China. The protest-ridden route is far from what the Chinese government wanted for its "journey of harmony," but many say this harmony needs to begin at home.

The present controversy surrounds the on-going persecution of Tibetans since the Chinese occupation of that country in 1950. Since then, an estimated 157,000 Tibetans have been executed and another 266,000 tortured to death in a continuing campaign by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to crush all opposition to Chinese rule. Thousands more are believed to have died while trying to flee the country.

However, because of their Buddhists beliefs, most Tibetans refuse to resort to violence and will only participate in peaceful protests, but the PRC has met even this scant resistance is with great force. In one case a 20 year old nun who was sentenced to five years in prison for participating in a peaceful protest, was beaten to death for singing a Tibetan song.

A 2002 report by Amnesty International states that "Human rights violations against Tibetan Buddhists and nationalists continued in Tibet. Reports continued of torture and ill-treatment of detainees and harsh prison conditions."

China has been on the U.S. State Departments list of Countries of Particular Concern for years. This list contains the names of countries in which the government has engaged in or tolerated "particularly severe violations of religious freedom" which are defined as being "systematic, ongoing and egregious."

However, the occasion of the Olympic torch coming to the Tibetan capital of Lhasa on June 20-21 has incited a new crackdown on the population by the Chinese government.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that since March 10, there have been an unprecedented number of demonstrations in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, as well as in three Chinese provinces and Beijing itself. In spite of the now world-wide attention on its behavior, Chinese security forces are responding by dispersing the protests, sometimes violently.

The Chinese government claims that 18 civilians and one policeman were killed, and a total of 623 people injured during the protests in Lhasa on March 12. Tibetan exile groups have reported that at least 80 people died during the protests. The Chinese government has now admitted opening fire on demonstrators in Sichuan and shooting four people. Foreign journalists were expelled from these areas shortly after the demonstrations began, and lines of communication of have been cut or heavily restricted.

"Either Tibet is open or it's not. If it is, let independent monitors and the media go there. If it's

not, the torch shouldn't go there either," said Sophie Richardson, Asia advocacy director for HRW, in a press release. "The Olympic torch should not be turned into a smokescreen to cover up human rights abuses."

Criticism is now being leveled at the International Olympic Committee (IOC), specifically its Ethics Commission, for refusing to articulate human rights standards for host countries. This has resulted in many abuses by the Chinese government relating to the Games themselves.

For instance, the government is imposing restrictions on foreign media that violate China's formal commitment made to win the right to host the Games; two civil rights activists were jailed on charges of state subversion who criticized the Beijing Olympics; and the PRC decided to allow the Olympic torch relay to go through Tibet in spite of the ongoing crackdown on ethnic Tibetans, a military lock down of the region, and a denial by the Chinese authorities to allow an international commission of inquiry to go to Tibet.

The IOC has made no public statement about any of these actions.

"The question isn't whether the IOC is a human rights organization," Richardson said.. "It's whether the Olympic movement respects human rights. If it does, remaining silent as China's crackdown intensifies isn't acceptable."

As a result, the path of the torch is a troubled one. The route through Paris quickly descended into chaos as angry demonstrators forced officials to extinguish the flame and take shelter in a bus.

In London, thousands of protestors lined the path shouting "Shame on China." At one point police were forced to hustle the flame onto a bus to protect it when a crowd of more than 100 protestors tried to seize it.

Even before its arrival in San Francisco on Wednesday, three pro-Tibet activists scaled the cables of the Golden Gate Bridge where they hung banners calling for "One World, One Dream: Free Tibet."

Meanwhile, the Chinese state-run media is having to focus on creative camera angles to portray only smiling faces along the torch route while hiding any evidence of the protestors.

But this is not surprising for a government with a long record of abuse directed toward its own population. In this country, there is no freedom of speech or religion. The state controls every aspect of life and often punishes violators through its notorious "administrative detention" system which allows no legal representation for offenders.

Common forms of this kind of detention include "re-education through labor" where they are sent to labor camps for up to four years or "shelter and investigation" where people are detained for an indefinite time without charges or a trial. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of Chinese citizens have been subjected to this system for a variety of violations.

Many who are detained in the country's barbarous prison system are never seen again. International human rights groups report that prisoners are routinely beaten with electric batons, spend long period in solitary confinement and live under food restrictions that are near starvation levels. In addition, corrupt authorities at detention centers, prisons and labor camps are known to extort huge sums of money from families of detainees for the state's provision of "daily supplies" or "medical expenses."

It is not since the Tianemmann Square massacre of 1989 that China's human rights violations have received so much worldwide attention. However, the choice of Beijing as a venue for the Olympics is being questioned around the world, especially because the Games are supposed to blend sport, culture and education into a "way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles."

Although many have called for an outright boycott, International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Jacques Rogge told the Association of National Olympic Committees in Beijing said there was "no momentum" for a boycott at the present time.

"Violence for whatever reason is not compatible with the values of the torch relay and the Olympic Games," he said after expressing concern over international events and what has been happening in Tibet. "Some people have played with the idea of boycotts. As I speak today, there is no momentum for a general boycott."

Meanwhile, the exiled Dalai Lama, who is the spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhists, continues to appeal to Beijing to open a "constructive dialogue" for a "peaceful solution" to the crisis. Just last week he insisted that he does not want to boycott the Olympics nor to ask for independence for Tibet, but only for "a full guarantee from the Chinese government on our unique cultural heritage, including our language and environment."

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