

Give Tibet a sporting chance

“We are convinced that the Games will improve human rights in China... If human rights are not acted upon to our satisfaction, then we will act.”

Jacques Rogge,
President
International
Olympic
Committee
April 2002



A Free Tibet briefing for athletes and others planning to attend the Beijing Olympics

June 2008

Why were there so many protests against the Beijing Olympics?

There has been a lot of media coverage of demonstrations in support of Tibet, particularly around the Olympic Torch Relay.

The protests were never against the Chinese people nor were they against sport or sportspeople. The protests were intended to highlight human rights abuses in Tibet and to prevent the Chinese government hijacking the Olympic ideals.

Tibetans cannot protest in their own country without risking their lives and liberty.

With the media spotlight on China in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, Tibetans and those who support them have a rare opportunity to raise awareness of the tragedy in Tibet.

What's the problem in Tibet?

Tibet was a sovereign country the size of Western Europe when it was invaded by the Chinese People's Liberation Army in 1950. At least half a million Tibetans have died as a direct result of the invasion and occupation of their country. Many more have been tortured and imprisoned.

Although the histories of these two neighbouring countries have always been closely linked, it is not true – as China claims – that Tibet has always been part of the Chinese 'motherland'. Tibetans have their own language, alphabet, religion and culture.

Every aspect of Tibetan culture is under assault by the ruling Chinese authorities. Basic human rights that we take for granted are denied to Tibetans, who have no freedom of speech and are denied the freedom to practise their religion. For example, owning a photograph of the Dalai Lama (Tibet's spiritual leader) or calling for his return to Tibet can lead to arrest, torture and lengthy imprisonment.

Just as the Welsh are distinct from the English, Tibetans are distinct in every way from their Chinese neighbours. And, like the Welsh, Tibetans want their culture to survive. They have very real fears for the very future of their unique identity.

If it's been going on for so long, why all the fuss now?

Beginning on the March 10th anniversary of the failed Tibetan uprising and knowing the eyes of the world were on China in the run up to the Olympics, Tibetans in all regions of historic Tibet were emboldened to make a desperate plea to the world for help.

The response of the Chinese government was to throw all journalists and other foreigners out of Tibet and bring in tens of thousands of additional troops to quash the protests.

Despite the blackout, Tibetans are managing to get information to the outside world.

They describe:

- more than 200 people killed, many by police and military shooting point blank at unarmed protesters,
- thousands of arbitrary arrests and the torture of men, women and children,
- increased pace of 'patriotic education' during which monks, nuns and ordinary Tibetan adults and children must denounce the Dalai Lama, their spiritual leader, or risk arrest for refusing to do so,
- rewards of up to 80,000 Yuan (nearly £6000) for information about anyone attempting to leak these details to the western media.

As one Tibetan told Free Tibet Campaign: **"We are fighting for our very survival. Without the support of the world, we will lose. We are armed with portraits of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. They are armed with machine guns."**

If it's so bad, why don't Tibetans just leave?

The Chinese government makes it almost impossible for most Tibetans to acquire passports, so they simply cannot leave Tibet legally.

However, every year thousands of Tibetans make the perilous journey across the Himalayas – risking freezing to death or being shot by a Chinese border guard – desperate to reach Dharamsala, India.

Dharamsala has been the home of the Dalai Lama since 1959 when he was forced to escape Tibet in the bloody aftermath of a failed uprising against Chinese rule. More than 100,000 Tibetans followed him into exile. The elected Tibetan government-in-exile was set up in Dharamsala.

Tibetans continue to make this hazardous journey because Dharamsala is where the Dalai Lama lives and where Tibetans can live freely as Tibetans, speaking their language, practising their religion and educating their children in their history and culture.

Okay, but what's this got to do with the Olympics?

China's appalling human rights record was acknowledged as a key issue even before the 2008 Games were awarded.

In 2001 the International Olympics Committee (IOC) said it was "taking a bet" that human rights in Tibet and China would improve as a result of Beijing hosting the Olympics. **It lost its bet – the human rights situation in Tibet and China is worse now than it was in 2001.**

In order to win the Games, the Chinese government promised in 2001 to allow new freedoms for the foreign press to travel without restriction anywhere in China. **They broke this promise – as soon as unrest began, all foreign journalists were rounded up and thrown out of all Tibetan areas.**

In 2002 IOC President Jacques Rogge said that if "human rights are not acted upon to our satisfaction then we will act." **The IOC failed to act.**

Now the IOC is complaining that the Olympics should not be politicised, ignoring the fact that the games became politicised the moment they were awarded to one of the world's most repressive regimes. **They can't have it both ways.**

According to the Olympic Charter: "Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles." **How can the Chinese government, accused by the Dalai Lama of committing "cultural genocide" in Tibet, claim to support Olympic ideals?**

There are other human rights abuses. Why Tibet?

Yes, it's true that there are terrible human rights abuses in countries like Burma and Sudan. Indeed, China is also criticised for supporting both these appalling regimes. However, China does not claim sovereignty over the Burmese or Sudanese people. In Tibet, the Chinese government is directly responsible for imprisoning and torturing people, directly responsible for shooting peaceful protesters, directly responsible for threatening the survival of Tibetan culture. That's why Tibet matters so much during the Beijing Olympics.

Is Free Tibet Campaign calling for an athletic boycott?

Free Tibet Campaign has always opposed the staging of the Olympics in a country with China's abysmal record on human rights. However, it is not the fault of athletes – who have been training and dreaming for years – that the IOC awarded the 2008 Games to one of the world's most repressive regimes.

Athletes should be allowed to compete. Athletes should also be entitled to an opinion and should not be gagged by anyone.

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What can I do?

Free Tibet Campaign hopes that athletes will educate themselves about the situation in Tibet. If they understand what is going on and how the Chinese government has attempted to hijack the Olympic ideals to mask terrible human rights abuses, we hope athletes might consider raising their concerns when they are in Beijing.

One way to do this might be to mention their concerns in press interviews.

Another important way they can make a difference is by discussing Tibet with the Chinese people they meet. Most Chinese people have no idea what is really going on in Tibet and are denied information by their government.

We would also welcome requests from athletes for Free Tibet t-shirts if they would like to use these as a means of silent protest about the brutal crackdown in Tibet.

Or they could simply make a "T for Tibet" hand signal to show support for the struggle of the Tibetan people. (For more information about the 'T for Tibet' campaign and the people supporting it, visit our website: www.freetibet.org.)



Actor Philip Glenister (best known as DCI Gene Hunt) shows his support with a "T for Tibet" hand signal.

What does Free Tibet Campaign want?

Free Tibet has been campaigning for 20 years for the right of the Tibetan people to determine their own future. We want Tibetans to be free of the threats, intimidation and persecution of the Chinese government.

How can I find out more?

There's lots of information about Tibet and the impacts of the Chinese occupation on our website, www.freetibet.org. You can read about the plight of political prisoners and about the struggle of Tibetans to maintain their cultural identity.

You can find out more about what we do and about what you can do to help Tibet.

Or you can ring us on **020 7324 4605**.



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