

BEIJING OLYMPIC GAMES

BRITISH OLYMPIC ASSOCIATION TOLD IT MUST NOT RESTRICT ATHLETES' FREEDOM OF SPEECH

European Olympic Committees urged to take a position on this issue at next executive committee meeting

Reporters Without Borders and Article 19 today called on British Olympic Association chief executive Simon Clegg to take no measures that could restrict the freedom of expression of British athletes while taking part in the Beijing Olympic Games.

A British newspaper yesterday revealed that the BOA wants to gag British participants but Olympic committees in other countries have said their athletes will be free to say what they want while outside of the Olympic venues.

“This affair is indicative of the lack of courage that characterizes some officials in the Olympic movement nowadays,” Reporters Without Borders and Article 19 said. “The International Olympic Committee is saying nothing about the human rights situation in China so why would national Olympic committees behave any differently?”

“Such behaviour ends up making the Chinese authorities look like victims with whom one has to choose one words carefully. This is back to front. The victims are the thousands of political prisoners and the 100 or so journalists, Internet users and bloggers who are in prison solely for expressing their views peacefully.”

The two organisations added: “If the athletes want to support them, they should be able to do so freely. We urge them to do this. The Chinese government flouts the Olympic Charter every day. Must the athletes respect it to the letter? This is clearly not right.”


According to yesterday’s report in a British newspaper, the draft agreement between the selected British athletes and their Olympic committee contains a clause banning them from commenting on any “politically sensitive issues” during the games. The Olympic Charter only bans political, religious or racial propaganda at Olympic venues.

The BOA also plans to organise training for its athletes so that they know how to respond to the media, especially on the human rights situation in China. Athletes who speak out or wear clothes that make a political statement could be excluded from the team. “This clause is intended to stop overt statements such as wearing a Free Tibet shirt,” a BOA spokesman said.

When questioned by journalists, Clegg said: "I accept that part of the draft BOA team members' agreement appears to have gone beyond the provisions of the Olympic Charter. That is not our intention nor is it our wish to restrict athletes' freedom of speech."

The Olympic committees of Canada, the United States, the Netherlands and Belgium have already publicly said they will not restrict their athletes' freedom of expression. The Australian committee, however, has reportedly asked its representatives not to comment on political issues in China.

Reporters Without Borders and Article 19 urge the various national Olympic committees to jointly undertake to impose no restrictions on their athletes' freedom of speech when they are in Beijing. There will be an opportunity for the European Olympic committees to do this when their executive committee meets on 20 February in Lausanne.

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