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ARTICLE 19

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China: the Sacrifice of the Olympic Spirit

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The Chinese government has broken its promises to improve human rights standards in the run up to the 2008 Olympic Games. China won the right to host the 2008 Olympics in 2001 based largely - at least so were we told – on its human rights pledges. In particular it promised “no restrictions on media reporting and movement of journalists up to and including the Olympic Games.”

However, as the Olympic Games have drawn closer, the integrity of the promise has faded. Not only have promises been broken, the human rights situation has actually deteriorated on this last leg of the Olympic preparation. Over these last 12 months, human rights organisations, including ARTICLE 19, have documented what amounts to an acceleration in human rights violations, including in censorship and attacks on media freedom, crackdown against Chinese human rights defenders and Tibetans protestors and so on.

To many of us within the human rights community, it seems that human rights, including freedom of expression, have been sacrificed on the altar of corporate sponsorship and market share; a sacrifice presided over by the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Ultimately it is the Chinese government that is directly responsible of course and accountable for its broken promises and for the violations of human rights it has committed in the countdown to the Olympics (and is likely to commit during the event itself and in its aftermath).

But it is the IOC’s quiet, callous if not cynical disregard for human rights, which should be highlighted as well. Their **quiet diplomacy** – an approach the IOC President has claimed the Committee was using – has amounted to **opaque, unaccountable** and **ineffective diplomacy**. And this should never have been an option for the international body responsible globally for up-holding the Olympic spirit: human dignity cannot be *promoted* by keeping quiet.

The potential impact of their speaking out was well demonstrated in the last week of July when dissenting voices within the IOC finally went public over China’s attempt to censor foreign journalists’ access to internet. Ultimately, when confronted with the increasing public uproar and, most importantly, with the evidence that the IOC’s polished silence would not stretch to this indignity, Chinese authorities had to back down and open uncensored internet access, at least as far as English websites are

concerned (the same openness though has not so far characterised websites in Mandarin). **It is a clear demonstration that if the IOC – or rather at least some of its more courageous spokespersons - dares to speak up, it does work, some things do move.**

Surely the same approach should be adopted by the Heads and Representatives of states who will attend the Games' opening and closing ceremonies in Beijing. The Olympic Games are a unique opportunity for the world to build and manifest mutual understanding, friendship, solidarity and fair play. But these objectives only ring hollow if human rights abuses are not publicly denounced, if calls for their immediate cessation are not issued and if in-depth reforms are not publicly advocated.

High-level representatives attending the Beijing Olympics have a duty to speak out against the continued abuse of freedom of expression in the country and in particular in the context of China's preparations and delivery of the Beijing Olympics.

No celebration of fair play and human dignity, even through sport, is ever achieved in the face of abuse through silence, silencing and bullying.

And, let's all make sure that this harmful precedent set by China and the IOC is never replicated and that London 2012 stands out as a true, vibrant and loud celebration of the Olympic Spirit.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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