

Brutal Olympic Echo

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China's crackdown against Tibetan protesters ahead of the Summer Olympics in Beijing carries with it a brutal echo from the past. Scores of people, including school children are reported dead and more repression has been promised. The People's Daily, the official newspaper of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC), said "[We must] resolutely crush the 'Tibet independence' forces' conspiracy and sabotaging activities."

Even after decades of occupation, the ruthlessness of the crackdown has shocked much of the world. It happens the week after the US State Department removed China from its list of the world's worst human rights offenders.

Yet the concern expressed by world leaders has seemed less for the people of Tibet than the fate of the Summer Games, with Olympic cash deemed more precious than Tibetan blood. The Olympics were supposed to be China's multibillion-dollar, super sweet sixteen. Britain's Minister for Africa, Asia and the United Nations, Mark Malloch-Brown told the BBC, "This is China's coming-out party, and they should take great care to do nothing that will wreck that."

Other countries hankering after a piece of China's thriving economy have rushed to put daylight between the crackdown in Tibet and the Olympics. No surprise, the Bush's White House, underwriting their war in Iraq on loans from Beijing, headed off any talk that President Bush would cancel his appearance at the Olympic Games when spokeswoman Dana Perino said Bush believed that the Olympics "should be about the athletes and not necessarily about politics." Earlier, the European Union said a "boycott would not be the appropriate way to address the work for respect of human rights, which means the ethnic and religious rights of the Tibetans."

While the nations of the West have ruled out the idea of boycotting the games, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said the other day that the EU should at least consider boycotting the opening ceremony if violence continues. Later Kouchner backtracked, saying "We're not in favor of it. When you're dealing in international relations with countries as important as China, obviously when you make economic decisions it's sometimes at the expense of human rights. That's elementary realism."

Whatever happens next, China's crackdown is not happening in spite of the Beijing Olympics, but because of them. It is a bold play by China to set a tone for the remainder of the year. Since its occupation of the country in 1951, China has suppressed its Buddhist faith and made Tibetans a persecuted minority in their own country via the mass migration of millions of Han Chinese. As monks and young Tibetans took their grievances to the streets over the weekend, the government made clear it would brook no protest and tolerate no dissent.

But it's helpful to remember that in many countries, pre-Olympic repression is as much of a tradition as lighting the torch.

In 1984, Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates oversaw the jailing of thousands of young black men in the infamous Olympic Gang Sweeps. Gates also sent the LA Swat Team to Israel and West Berlin for special training.

The 1996 Atlanta games were supposed to demonstrate the gains of the New South, but the New South ended up looking much like the old one, as public housing was razed to make way for Olympic venues, homeless people were chased off the streets and perceived trouble-makers were arrested. As Wendy Pedersen of the Carnegie Community Action Project recently recalled in Vancouver, BC, another city poised to crack down on crime, drugs and homelessness in preparation for the Winter Olympics in 2010, Atlanta officials "had six ordinances that made all kinds of things illegal, including lying down. Lots of people were shipped out, and lots of people were put in jail. [The Olympic Planning Committee] actually built the city jail. Activists there called it the first Olympic project completed on time."

Repression followed the Olympic Rings to Greece in 2004. As the radio program "Democracy Now," reported at the time, authorities in Athens "round[ed] up homeless people, drug addicts and the mentally ill, requiring that psychiatric hospitals lock them up." The pre-Olympics "cleanup" included detaining or deporting refugees and asylum-seekers. Being the first Olympics after 9/11, police surveillance of immigrant Muslims and makeshift mosques in Athens greatly increased.

But the worst example of Olympic repression--and the most resonant to the current moment--came in 1968 in Mexico City, where hundreds of Mexican students and workers occupying the National University were slaughtered in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas on October 2, 1968, ten days before the start of the games. Recently declassified documents paint a picture of a massacre as cold and methodical as President Luis Echeverría's instructions.

Echeverría's aim was the same as China's: a pre-emptive strike to make sure that using the Olympic games as a platform for protest would not be on the itinerary. The irony, of course, is that while Echeverría succeeded in crushing the protest movement outside the games, on the inside US athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their black-gloved fists in an expression of Black Power, cementing the 1968 games as a place defined by discontent. It's a lesson the 2008 athletes might remember. Officials may try to smother dissent on the streets of Lhasa and elsewhere in China, but in the games themselves—from the path of the Olympic torch up Mount Everest to the opulent venues constructed in Beijing—the risk for protest, and the opportunity, is real. □