

Religious freedom panel says Bush should skip games or visit Tibet: Commission on International Religious Freedom

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An independent federal body that monitors religious freedom is urging President Bush not to attend the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Beijing unless there are discernible changes in China's policy toward Tibet.

The Washington-based Commission on International Religious Freedom said in an April 4 statement that if Bush decides to attend the games, he should first visit the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, or another Tibetan area "in an affirmation of the U.S. commitment to religious freedom for Tibetans, as well as for China's other growing religious communities."

The August games in Beijing are becoming a symbol for human rights protesters in different parts of the world, both because of China's recent crackdown in Tibet and because of the country's close relationship with the government of Sudan, which is widely accused of human rights abuses in the western Sudanese region of Darfur.

On April 7, protesters disrupted the running of the Olympic torch in Paris, the same day that Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, citing the protests and Chinese-Sudanese ties, urged Bush to boycott the opening Olympic ceremonies in Beijing.

"These events underscore why I believe the Bush administration has been wrong to downplay human rights in its policy toward China," Clinton said.

White House spokesperson Tony Fratto told reporters on April 7 that Bush still plans to attend, calling the ceremonies a sporting event, not a political event. Fratto said the Bush administration "has not been afraid to express" concerns over China's

human rights record.

Tensions flared in March between Tibetans and Chinese forces after peaceful protests against Chinese control grew violent. On April 6, the Dalai Lama called the recent violence the result of “pent-up physical and mental anguish of the Tibetans and the feelings of deep resentment against the suppression of the rights of Tibetan people.”

China accuses the Dalai Lama, the exiled leader of Tibetan Buddhists, of promoting demonstrations in Tibet led by Buddhist monks in order to try to sabotage the August 8-24 games. The Dalai Lama denies this, saying he wants the games to go ahead.

Meanwhile, protesters in London, Paris and San Francisco disrupted torch-carrying ceremonies, the traditional prelude to the Summer Olympics.

The religious freedom commission, which has bilateral support in Congress and is mandated to monitor abuse of freedom of religion or belief internationally, said one way China could signal its willingness to improve the situation in Tibet would be to hold “direct and concrete talks” with the Dalai Lama.

Other ways, the commission said, include releasing all detained monks and nuns, lifting current restrictions “that are the source of resentment and protest [and] announcing that devotion to the Dalai Lama, including displaying and venerating his picture, is not a criminal act.”

Citing other sources of discontent, Michael Cromartie, the commission chair, said, “China’s plans to ‘pacify’ Tibet through religious repression alongside economic modernization and in-migration of mostly ethnic Han Chinese have fueled a deep and lasting resentment.” The Chinese have long imposed “patriotic education” in Tibet rather than allowing freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the panel said.

By contrast, the official Web site of the 2008 Olympic Games says: “China is a country with religious freedom and respects every religion. Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Christianity are religions found in Beijing. Religious activities are carried out in Buddhist temples, Taoist temples, mosques and churches in Beijing.” *-Ecumenical News International, Religion News Service*