

Olympics ceremony won't include moment for murdered Israelis

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c. 2012 Religion News Service JERUSALEM (RNS) Despite international pressure -- including support from both U.S. presidential candidates -- the International Olympic Committee has refused to include a moment of silence at Friday's (July 27) opening ceremony for Israeli athletes killed by terrorists at the games 40 years ago.

President Obama and his likely GOP challenger, Mitt Romney, have both called for the IOC to honor the 11 Israelis murdered in Munich in 1972.

"We absolutely support the campaign for a moment of silence at the Olympics to honor the Israeli athletes killed in Munich," Obama spokesman Tommy Vietor said in a statement.

IOC President Jacques Rogge said a smaller, more somber ceremony would better memorialize the tragedy.

IOC officials made a brief statement and held a moment of silence on Monday during a pre-Olympics event in London, where the 2012 games begin on Friday.

"I would like to start today's ceremony by honoring the memory of 11 Israeli Olympians who shared the ideals that have brought us together in this beautiful Olympic Village," Rogge said.

But families of the Israeli victims insist the opening ceremony, which is watched by millions of people around the world, is the only fitting place to memorialize the athletes, who were attacked in the Munich Olympic Village by Palestinian terrorists during the games.

Ankie Spitzer, the widow of Andre Spitzer, an Israeli coach, and a driving force behind the campaign for a moment of silence, dismissed Monday's ceremony.

"This is not the right solution, to hold some ceremony in front of 30 or 40 people," Spitzer told The Jerusalem Post. "We asked for a moment of silence at the opening ceremony, not for someone to mumble something in front of a few dozen people."

But Rogge has said that holding a moment of silence would constitute a "political" act and that the games must be apolitical.

"We feel that we are able to give a very strong homage and remembrance within the sphere of the national Olympic committee. We feel that the opening ceremony is an atmosphere that is not fit to remember such a tragic incident," Rogge said.

Although Spitzer and other widows had been trying for decades to convince the IOC to honor the Israelis at the opening ceremony, it was a group of grass-roots activists from a New York Jewish community center who launched a petition in April that has gathered more than 100,000 signatures.

Steve Gold, one of the activists, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that Jewish communal groups like the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Federations of North America have been instrumental in leading the fight.

"There was not one organization that said they would not help us ... so it began to go viral," Gold said.

In addition to the petition, many people also are planning to recall the tragedy in a more personal way.

The group Minute for Munich is calling for people to "stop for a minute and stand in silence ... wherever you may be" at 11 a.m. British time on Friday. Its memorial service will be streamed live over the Internet.

Another initiative is encouraging synagogues and Jewish groups to hold a memorial service for the massacre victims this Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath.

Barry Shaw, who is spearheading the synagogue effort, said that at least 300 congregations "from Sydney to San Diego" will be reciting special prayers.

"This will be held this Shabbat, which falls, significantly, between the opening of the 2012 Games and the Fast of Tisha B'Av," an annual Jewish day of mourning that commemorates tragedies in Jewish history.

A prayer written by British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks asks God to "comfort the families and friends of the Israeli athletes who continue to grieve, and to grant eternal life to those so cruelly robbed of life on earth."

It notes, too, "the Olympic message is one of peace, of harmony and of unity" and asks God to bring "reconciliation and respect between faiths as we pray for the peace of Israel," and for "the peace of the world."