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Conference report

1. Beijing's pledges and the running of the Games: Who is accountable?

International legitimacy has a price

Hélène Flautre, Chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights, moderated the first panel and said: "The IOC took a specific gamble because the choice of Beijing was aimed at encouraging China on the way to reforms."

Michel Bonnin, research director at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, in Paris, said Beijing wanted to host the Olympic Games for a specific reason: "They want to draw a line after the Tiananmen events. They need legitimacy vis-à-vis the international community and, on the domestic level, to recover public support.

While recognising athlete's freedom of expression, **Ingo-Rolf Weiss,** from German Olympic Sports Confederation balanced his position in accordance to the rules of the Olympic Charter: "We have to take a respectful approach to our partners in China but we have also to point out things that go wrong.

Belgian Olympic judo champion, **Gella Vandecaveye**, now retired from competition will not be going to Beijing to compete. She therefore had all latitude to speak her mind. In an open letter published in the press, she asked politicians to take their responsibilities on Tibet and China and not to penalise athletes.

Closely linked to the choice of Beijing to host the Games are the economic interests they represent. **Carole Crabbé**, from Clean Clothes Belgium and partner in the Play Fair 2008 campaign reminded everyone that big business was perhaps on top of the list of reasons for giving the Games to China.

2. Should the media live with censorship and surveillance?

"The cage is bigger but the bird is still in the cage"

Several European journalists talked about their personal experience of censorship and surveillance of the media.Vice-President of the Greens/EFA Group, **(Photo) Eva Lichtenberger**, moderated the second panel and said: "Freedom of press is not only a matter for the Olympic Games. For many minority groups within China, hopes were linked to the Olympics. They hoped that it would mean freedom of information would be improved."

Erich Möchel, Journalist for the website of Austria's ORF national television is a specialist on electronic surveillance. He said China effectively had an intranet rather than an internet. According to him, telephone surveillance is even worse and European technology, some of it developed in China for this purpose, is at the heart of this monitoring.

Rémy Fière, journalist with the French sports daily l'Equipe said all journalists covering the Games, sports or otherwise, would not ignore political and social issues despite the number of restrictions.

Philippe Rochot was France 2's correspondent in China from 2000 to 2006. He experienced restrictions first-hand: "There have been improvements but as a Chinese journalist said: The cage is bigger but the bird is still in the cage,"he said. "The Games will be strictly monitored. The police will prevent journalists there for the Games to report on the recent natural disaster for example. Foreigners can get around censorship and face little risk of expulsion. Consequences are much harder for Chinese people," he continued.

The simple fact of being a journalist can considerably hamper one's ability to report in China. As **Sabine Verhest**, from the Belgian daily La Libre Belgique said: "Some journalists don't ask for journalist visas, since the Chinese authorities are very restrictive.

3. Boycott of the opening ceremony and what else?

One step forward, two steps back

Nancy Li, a mission expert with the FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights) asked world leaders to consider two factors when deciding to boycott or not the opening ceremony of the Beijing Games: Did China keep the promises it made in 2001 to improve the human rights situation and the kind of human rights problems generated directly by the preparation of the Games - especially forced evictions to build Olympic venues.

Special envoy of the Dalai Lama to the EU, **Kelsang Gyalsten**, said the situation in Tibet continued to be very alarming as the region was still totally sealed off from the outside world. He reaffirmed the Tibetan position that is not to seek separation and independence of Tibet, but genuine autonomy for the Tibetan people.

James Moran, Director for Asia at the European Commission's External Relations Directorate, reiterated the Commission's recent message to China: "President Barroso discussed the human rights issue, cultural and linguistic rights of the Tibetan people as well as foreign journalists' inaccessibility to Tibet with Chinese leaders."

China specialist, **Chloé Froissart**, said that with the Olympic Games coming up, authorities have taken a step backwards and gone back to using residence permits, arrests and even police sweeps: "They have decided that Beijing needed to be cleaned of 1 million migrant workers before the Games start," said Froissart.

Sport is political

Robert Ménard, secretary general of Reporters sans Frontières, condemned the international community's lack of reaction on Beijing's pledges to improve its human rights records when it won the Games: "Politicians, Olympic Committees, private companies, no one has done a thing! Today, no one can say that China has done enough so that we can lift the threat of boycotting the opening ceremony. The opening ceremony is not sports. It is the image a state wishes to convey to the outside world."

As Co-President of the Greens/EFA Group, **Daniel Cohn-Bendit** said, one variable Chinese censors will not be able to control is what athletes will do when the worlds' cameras are on them: "Nobody can control this. If they are on the podium there is nothing between them and the world. Sporting journalists will have a role to play."

He called on the IOC to stop pretending sport is not political: "The greatest political stage for the Olympics

is the opening ceremony, which will seek to glorify China and its system. It is right, therefore, to continue to call heads of states and governments to boycott this ceremony unless substantial and immediate progress is made in terms of human rights in China."

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