Test the promises

Human rights will stick to the Beijing Olympics like chewing gum under a school bank, said the European Press Director Jean Paul Marthoz from Human Rights Watch and presented a tip sheet for journalists

By Jean Paul Marthoz

If journalists refuse to see that politics mixes with sports they should change jobs, and why not, become pom pom girls or FIFA stenographers. Politics has always been the fellow traveller of sports, and especially of Olympic sports [...]

The 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing is of course no exception and China is not a country that leaves anyone indifferent. It is a great country, a huge country that plays a leading role on the international scene. It is also a country with a one-party regime which has a very bad human rights record. This is where politics, like Manuel Puig’s spider woman, again kisses sports.

[...] When China was selected I felt like the lonely goalkeeper at the moment of the penalty. HRW decided however, contrary to other human rights organizations like Reporters sans frontiers and after an intense internal discussion, not to join the campaign for the boycott of Beijing 2008.Why?[...]

Because to start with, HRW is not convinced that heavy-handed sanctions are necessarily effective. Although we recognize the validity of the sanctions argument against the South African apartheid we believe that too often sanctions act like cluster bombs with their indiscriminate collateral damage, hitting the wrong people in the open field when the real guys are safely hidden in their bunkers. [...]

Secondly we listened to our friends in the Chinese human rights movement and they were telling us that a “no” to Beijing would be met with a toughening of the regime and would put the democrats under pressure since they would be accused of being traitors and anti-Chinese.

Strategically we also thought that the preparations for the Olympic Games would give us several years that could be used to highlight the human rights situation in China and help improve it.

[...] This is the time now to escape from the strategic boardroom and to go back to the newsroom. Human rights will be a constant issue before and during the Beijing Olympics. It will stick to the coverage like a chewing gum under a school bank.

So what will journalists be confronted with? What should they be looking and prepare themselves for? Here is my tip sheet:

- In an era when big companies like Nike, Adidas and the like are thinking about corporate social responsibility, check with the sponsors on how they can avoid being part of a human rights abusive system. In a letter to foreign companies bidding on construction of Olympic facilities, for instance, HRW insisted that they should adopt a code of conduct for the treatment of their workers, that those losing property or housing be fairly compensated and that migrants living in and around Beijing being displaced for the Olympics be fairly treated and not abused.

- The same scrutiny should be applied to companies involved in special security systems, in-cluding surveillance and other equipment. Some of the technology could probably be recycled and used against dissidents. Check what kinds of safeguards are built to limit opportunities for abuse.

- Internet companies should be urged to take a pro active role and press for the lifting of the various regulations and controls now in place on web contact and access.

- Press freedom is a parameter of other freedoms and international journalists should closely monitor the situation of press freedom in China since it will have an impact on their own capacity to report. Now, as described in HRW world report 2003, the situation is rather grim. China blocked major Internet search engines, closed publications, harassed foreign and domestic journalists, tightened controls on satellite transmission, and hampered the work of academics and activists.

- Just prior to the IOC’s decision to award China the Games, Wang Wei, secretary-general of the Official Beijing Committee, had said: “we will give the media complete freedom to report when they come to China”. Journalists should test this promise. They should check with the IOC on how they intend to live up to their rhetoric and make sure that China honours its pledge to allow all foreign journalists “complete freedom” to report. They should make sure that the international media have unrestricted access and there will be no discrimination against journalists or participants based on their political or religious views and country of origin.

- They should get guarantees that there would be no retaliation against Chinese citizens interviewed by the press.

- Let us never forget, unlike the famous Wonder batteries, press freedom only runs out if you do not use it!

Jean Paul Marthoz spoke as European Press Director of Human Rights Watch - www.hrw.org. He is now editor-in-chief at La Libre Belgique.
Is it an exclusive right for the Western hemispher to define what human rights mean, or can a country select its own definition of these international norms?

Questions like these were addressed bluntly in the first public debate between the Chinese organisers of the Olympic Summer Games 2008 and a conference room packed with journalists and sports researchers on the alert.

Vice Director of the Media and Communications Department for the 2008 Olympics organisers, Sun Weijia, accepted to face the challenge of a direct and unrestricted debate.

For Weijia, it was important to outline China’s organisational and the practical preparations for the Games.

He expressed his belief that the games will leave a legacy of significant progress in Beijing's infrastructure, provide greater international exposure for the nation's culture, and further integrate China into the global community.

When the floor was opened for debate, the participants did not spare political sensitivities. Even the first question touched the nerve that was to last for half an hour's questioning. How would the Chinese deal with the question of human rights in the period from now until 2008?

First of all, Sun Weijia pointed out that he could only offer his personal opinion, as he did not represent the government. «We do attach great importance to the improvement of human rights, but - but we think that different national situations, different backgrounds and different stages of development can lead to different needs in so far as human rights,» Weijia said and referred to the fact that China accounts for 1/5 of the world population.

«The biggest demand in my view is the legitimate claim for development, a better life for. Over the past twenty years the Chinese government has succeeded in improving the living standards for all these people, and I think this is the biggest contribution a country can make to the cause of human rights.»

Olahayode Thomas of Nigeria then asked what a high standard of living is worth without freedom. «In China freedom for everybody is guaranteed by the constitution.» countered Sun Weijia.

«We have rights guaranteed by our constitution. People can go everywhere they want, do everything they want to do and they can work or not as they like.»

The staging of the Olympics will certainly improve democratisation and modernisation of the country - but that doesn’t mean that were are not a democratic country now.

Illegal - and not permitted

When Ann Callaghan from the London-based Free Tibet Campaign raised the issues of Falun Gong and of a Tibetan activist being sent to work camp for trying to influence the IOC's stand on China, Sun Weijia was less forthcoming.

«The problem of Falun Gong it that it is illegal. And like in your countries, what is illegal is not permitted. This is very simple,» Weijia said.

When met with the objection that in China it is easier than in other countries to be declared a threat to the security of the state, Weijia sharpened the tone.

He stressed that China has a seat in all important human rights commissions under the United Nations, and will comply with their obligations in that respect.

«But I could never understand the approach that consists in taking your criteria for human rights in your country and for your people, and impose these criteria for other countries,» Weijia replied.

Promises for the media

Margita Boström from Sweden and Janet Heinonen of the USA wanted to know if journalists would be allowed to work freely during the Olympics - and if this would mean general improvements for journalists working in China.

As for the last point, Sun Weijia would only confirm that, in the interests of security, travelers must indeed inform authorities of their destination.

However, foreign as well as Chinese media would have the best conditions during the Games.

The working conditions will be the same or even better than in previous games in other countries. This includes the freedom of movement and the freedom of reporting,» Weijia promised.

Professor John Hoberman of the USA referred to China's use of the public executions and the freedom of reporting, «The working conditions will be the same or even better than in previous games in other countries.»

Weijia stated with all clarity that it was illegal, but questioned the validity of the information.

Also, he did not feel competent to say if China's use of the death penalty would be changed before 2008.

With that, the session drew to a close. Conference coordinator Jens Sejer Andersen thanked the vice-director by saying:

«This readiness for unrestricted dialogue points to two things: the great professionalism of the Chinese organisers in the preparation of the Olympic Games 2008 and the hope that these games will be a part of a mutual learning process.»

The official website for the Olympic Games in Beijing is www.beijing-2008.org