Is the exclusive right for the Western hemisphere 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 Communication 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 20 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.”

Olkayode 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 asked if the selling of the executed prisoner’s organs to foreign patients was legal in China.

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