

Ahead of Olympics, activists launch 'human rights torch relay' against China abuses

The Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece: Human rights activists gathered in Athens on Thursday to launch a global "human rights torch relay" to highlight allegedly widespread human rights abuses in China, one year ahead of the Beijing Olympics.

Followers of the Falun Gong spiritual group — which is banned in China — led the protest, attending a flame lighting ceremony in central Athens for the relay which organizers said will include about 25 countries.

Greece is the birthplace of the Olympics and hosts the official flame lighting ceremony at Ancient Olympia for all Summer and Winter Games.

Athens also hosted the 2004 Olympics.

Thursday's three-hour ceremony in Athens bore some resemblance with the Olympia ceremony, with women dressed in ancient Greek costumes carrying the flame.

About 300 people, mostly from Greece and China, attended the small ceremony at the city's main Syntagma Square, a common focal point of protest rallies.

"Human rights has been getting steadily worse in China over the last couple of years, I don't think there is any disagreement on that," said veteran Canadian politician David Kilgour, a former Secretary of State for Asia-Pacific, who helped organize the event.

"Sponsors and individual athletes make their own decision on whether to (boycott) the games. I don't think governments will do it, for all the wrong reasons."

Kilgour said the relay would include most major Canadian cities and several in the United States, as well as European and Asian countries, but organizers of the protest did not have an itinerary of the event.

Jan Becker, a former Australian Olympic swimmer, also visiting Athens, said: "Human dignity is more important than any sporting event."

Human rights groups say China has failed to improve its internationally criticized human rights practices in the run up to the Olympics.

On Tuesday, Amnesty International — which was not involved in the Athens protest — said Chinese authorities are continuing to pursue an "ongoing crackdown" against dissidents, including journalists and human rights activists.

"These ongoing human rights violations go against the core principles of the Olympic Charter, such as 'the preservation of human dignity' and 'respect for universal fundamental ethical principles,'" the group said.

The Beijing Olympics begin on Aug. 8, 2008.

Source:

<http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/08/09/sports/EU-SPT-OLY-Greece-Beijing-Countdown.php>