

China's Olympic Trials

Monday 11 August 2008, by [ZIRIN Dave](#) (Date first published: 4 August 2008).

"Go Red for China!" was the slogan unveiled on the Chinese mainland by Pepsi-Cola, whose ubiquitous blue can will, "for a limited time," be red. Pepsi is just one of many companies advertising at the Olympics, at a cost of up to \$6 billion, in an attempt to tap a largely untouched market of more than 1 billion. "You've never seen the Olympics in a market that has such domestic commercial scale," Michael Wood, chief executive for greater China at advertising firm Leo Burnett, told the *New York Times*. "When the Olympics were in Los Angeles and Atlanta, the U.S. market was already fully developed."

This is the Olympics the West wanted: games where the grandest prize is not a gold medal but a glittering entree to China's seemingly endless army of potential consumers. This is the reason that George W. Bush will attend the opening ceremonies, the first U.S. President to do so on foreign soil, and that in March, mere days before the crackdown in Tibet, Condoleezza Rice, laughably, took China off the State Department's list of nations that abuse human rights.

But if the stakes are high for Western capitalism, for China they may well be higher. Beijing has spent as much as \$40 billion to build train stations and Olympic facilities, uprooting more than 1.5 million residents, all in the hope that the games would mark, as the official Xinhua news agency put it, a "historical event in the great renaissance of the Chinese nation."

National renaissance, however, may be giving way to revolt, both internally and from the athletes themselves. The buzz in the lead-up to 8/8/08 is not merely in Beijing. It's in Hunan, Shanghai, Guizhou and earthquake-devastated Sichuan, which have all recently seen mass demonstrations against Communist Party rulers. Provincial authorities are now under extraordinary pressure to crack down on protests. Instructions from Beijing are to "go on a war footing" to head off further upheaval before the games.

The steady percolation of the conflict at home has been matched — or even exceeded — by international anger. Athletes, activists and globe-trotting protesters are poised to raise a panoply of issues, including China's crackdown on Tibet, its support for the Sudanese regime and environmental concerns. The Communist Party has been forced to respond to this pressure cooker by opening a steam valve, announcing on July 24 that public protests will be permitted during the games inside three designated city parks. But as the *Times* reported, "Demonstrators must first obtain permits from local police and also abide by Chinese laws that usually make it nearly impossible to legally picket over politically charged issues."

If Chinese leaders believe that will release enough steam for a smooth games, they could be in for a surprise. Olympic protest may extend beyond the parks. More than 200 athletes from "Team Darfur" may be wearing bracelets and speaking out against human rights abuses. As Jessica Mendoza of the U.S. softball team told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, "I don't think it's my place to tell China what to do. But I do think it's my place to tell people what is happening. I want people to know that nearly 400,000 people have been killed in Darfur since 2004." Athletes are also angry that the air quality in what Beijing is calling the "green Olympics" could be hazardous to their health.

A public relations catastrophe could be in the making if dissenters manage to break through the

media blockade that runs from Beijing's troubling record on press freedom to NBC's soft news coverage. It should not be China's to bear alone; it should be shared by the Western nations and corporations that got the games they wanted.

P.S.

* From Edge of Sports:

<http://www.edgeofsports.com/2008-08-04-366/index.html>