

China, Darfur, and the 2008 Summer Olympics: An Intolerable Contradiction

Written by Eric Reeves

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2008/04/20/china-darfur-and-the-2008-summer-olympics-an-intolerable-contradiction/>

ERIC REEVES, APR 20 2008

Despite the common claim that China can't be moved by international pressure from human rights or advocacy groups, the campaign to link genocide in Darfur to Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Summer Olympic Games has thoroughly belied this notion. Steven Spielberg's resignation in February as an artistic director for the opening and closing ceremonies badly stung Chinese leaders, and the clumsiness of their response only emphasized how severely they were embarrassed. More revealingly, a year ago, shortly after initial articulation of a campaign to brand these the "Genocide Olympics," China appointed a special envoy for Darfur, something Beijing had refused to do for four years.

Subsequently, as advocacy pressure grew, Beijing also voted for UN Security Council Resolution 1769 (July 2007), authorizing deployment—under Chapter Seven of the UN Charter—of a peace support operation comprising 26,000 civilian police and troops. Chapter Seven confers enforcement authority, and Resolution 1769 has a robust mandate for protection of civilians and humanitarians. Previously China had abstained on or threatened to veto all meaningful security measures for Darfur, specifically those with Chapter 7 authority. Prior to the Security Council vote, in an unprecedented foreign policy move, Beijing publicly urged Khartoum to be "more flexible" in accommodating the deployment of these forces, thus implicitly criticizing the regime for its diplomatic obstructionism. And in March of this year, China yet again declared that Khartoum "should be more flexible" on the issues preventing deployment of the UN force.

A year ago, many—including many China "experts"—declared that all such achievements were simply impossible, that China's well-known policy of "non-interference" in the internal matters of sovereign nations would prevail no matter what the pressure. Whatever the validity of such generalization in normal circumstances, China's hosting of the Olympics Games created a moment of unexpectedly ripe opportunity. The Darfur/China campaign's central assertion has been relentless and unyielding: there is an intolerable contradiction between Beijing's hosting of the premier event in international sports while at the same time remaining complicit in the ultimate international crime, genocide in Darfur.

Of course there are increasingly robust campaigns critical of Beijing's continuing destruction of Tibet, its poor and deteriorating domestic human rights record (despite promises to the International Olympic Committee that human rights would improve in the run-up to the Games), and its support of brutally repressive regimes in Burma and Zimbabwe (e.g., Chinese weapons continue to be shipped to Zimbabwe even after Mugabe has yet again denied the people of his ravaged country the right to choose a new leader). But my focus here is on Darfur, and in particular the potential and consequences of holding China accountable for its actions in Sudan. I won't address these other large issues, or arguments falling under the glib rubric of "don't politicize the Games"—a fatuous imperative that presumes Beijing is not already using the Games for explicit geopolitical purposes: as its post-Tiananmen coming out party and moment of ascension to what it regards as its appropriate place on the world stage.

Beijing has over the past decade been Khartoum's primary supplier of weapons and weapons technology. Many weapons of Chinese manufacture continue to find their way into Darfur despite a UN arms embargo on the region. Amnesty International and a UN Panel of Experts on Darfur have reported for well over a year on the deadly flow of

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Chinese weapons, including military aircraft, into Darfur.

China has over the past decade also dominated Sudan's oil development, mainly in the south of the country, and done so in ways deeply destructive of southern civilian lives and livelihoods. As China's thirst for crude oil grows by more than 10 percent a year, Sudan has emerged as its primary source of offshore oil production. More than two-thirds of Sudan's oil is imported by China, which shows no signs of caring about the human costs of oil extraction.

China has provided as much as \$15 billion in capital and commercial investments in Sudan's Khartoum-dominated economy, insulating the regime from its greed and profligate arms purchases (massive external debt would be crippling without Chinese investment). The effect of such vast but selective investment is to consolidate the regime's stranglehold on national wealth and power.

Most consequentially, China has continuously blocked effective UN actions on Darfur, threatening to veto Security Council resolutions, weakening others, and all the while refusing to countenance any form of sanctions in the event of Khartoum's non-compliance with UN demands or agreements signed by the regime. Here we see the limitations of the present "Genocide Olympics" campaign, although it continues to generate more pressure on Beijing, and may yet succeed in compelling more effective deployment of forces for civilian and humanitarian protection, the only goal of the campaign.

Here it is important to understand the most fundamental logic of focusing on China and its hosting of the Olympics. The governing premise is that China has immense, indeed unrivaled leverage with the Khartoum regime—by virtue of arms transfers, critical foreign investment in the regime-dominated economy, and unstinting protection of Khartoum at the Security Council. If China were really to exercise the leverage it has, Khartoum would simply not have the confidence to defy Beijing's wishes on the issue of deploying the UN-authorized peace support operation.

The Arab League (meaning Egypt, which still regards Sudan as a southern colony) would of course continue to support Khartoum. But even the Organization of Islamic Conference, which had been shamefully silent on the mass destruction of Muslims in Darfur, has finally found its voice and is unlikely to offer further uncritical support. Frustration is mounting within the UN, among powerful member states, and even within the African Union, though the "hybrid" nature of the operation in Darfur ensures that all actors have ample means to evade responsibility for the fact that nine months after passage of Resolution 1769, security continues to deteriorate throughout Darfur. Disgracefully, only an ill-equipped third of the authorized force is on the ground, primarily holdovers from the previous and thoroughly ineffective African Union Mission in Sudan.

To date, rather than respond to the intolerable security crisis in Darfur orchestrated by Khartoum, China has attempted to substitute a highly skilled and amply funded public relations campaign—along with strategic concessions—for full commitment to protecting 4.3 million Darfuris the UN estimates are now affected by the conflict. This represents two-thirds of the pre-war population, much of it now deeply endangered as the region heads into the rainy season (beginning in June) and the traditional "hunger gap" between spring planting and fall harvest. Insecurity has compelled the UN World Food Program to cut food rations in half, a disastrous development given the rising levels of malnutrition already evident to humanitarians on the ground. Travel by aid workers is increasingly restricted to expensive helicopter flights, for which present funding is woefully inadequate. And most ominously, insecurity has pushed humanitarian organizations to the brink of withdrawal. Operations have already become highly attenuated, but in the event that continuing insecurity compels large-scale withdrawals, we will see cataclysmic human destruction.

These deaths won't be from ethnically-primarily the case from 2002 to nearly 2005, but rather from disease and malnutrition consequent upon earlier attacks against the African tribal populations of Darfur. Presently, some 14,000 humanitarian workers—increasingly Sudanese nationals—provide food, clean water, sanitation, and primary medical care for the vast conflict-affected population. Yet it would take only a few targeted killings of expatriate workers to collapse this immense effort. Hundreds of workers, including some expatriate workers, have over the past four years, been killed, assaulted, raped, car-jacked, and beaten—some by Khartoum's security forces.

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All this is occurring before our eyes, despite solemn declarations of a “responsibility to protect” precisely such civilians as are so conspicuously endangered in Darfur. China was a signatory to the UN World Summit “Outcome Document” of September 2005, which explicitly articulated this “responsibility” so as to supersede claims of national sovereignty such as the Khartoum regime continues to make. China is also bound by Security Council Resolution 1674 (April 2006) which unambiguously endorsed the key provisions of the UN “Outcome Document” and the doctrine of an international “responsibility to protect” civilians threatened by genocide, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.

We hear much about the need to be cautious in confronting or shaming Beijing, much about the risk of strengthening the hand of the nationalists, who have found new strength in the ideological vacuum that followed upon the collapse of Maoist communism. But catering to Chinese nationalism inevitably comes at the expense of supporting those working to liberalize China and compel greater attention to human rights. Their voices are desperate that pressure be increased on Beijing; they fully approve of the range of international advocacy efforts presently underway. The Olympics are undoubtedly a moment of great national pride, and there is widespread resentment in China of what Beijing allows to be reported of Western advocacy efforts, as well as resentment within the Chinese diaspora.

But if we are politically expedient in the face of genocide, if we acquiesce before China’s obdurate support of a defiantly genocidal regime in Khartoum, then we have lost our moral way. If fear of offending Beijing trumps the explicit obligations of the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, we are making a mockery of the solemn declarations of the past 60 years.

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