

TIBET, CHINA, AND THE OLYMPICS

Introduction

Focus

This *News in Review* story focuses on the ongoing conflict between Tibet and China. Tibetan activists who want independence from China have targeted China's preparations for the 2008 Summer Olympics. These protests have placed concerns about repression in Tibet and other Chinese human rights abuses in the international spotlight. But many Western nations, including Canada, are reluctant to boycott the Games and risk damaging trade relations with China, an increasingly important trading partner.

China has controlled Tibet since 1959. In March 2008, a wave of violent protests erupted in Lhasa, Tibet's capital, and in other parts of the country. Ethnic Tibetans took to the streets to vent their long-pent-up fury over China's heavy-handed occupation and their lack of freedom. Chinese settlers in the region were targeted for especially harsh treatment.

Many of the protesters were Buddhist monks, followers of the Dalai Lama, the religious leader of the Tibetan people and a Nobel Peace Prize winner. He has lived in exile in India ever since Chinese leader Mao Zedong ordered his troops into Tibet to consolidate China's control over the long-rebellious territory. The Dalai Lama has always maintained a policy of non-violent resistance to Chinese rule and has not demanded total independence for Tibet. However, many younger Tibetans, both inside and outside the region, have grown tired of waiting and have seized on the occasion of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, scheduled to open in August 2008, to draw the attention of the world to their cause.

One of the most important preliminary Olympic activities is the torch relay. The torch is lit in Olympia, Greece, the home of the original Olympic Games, and is then relayed around the world, making a ceremonial appearance in selected cities before completing its long journey at the host country's Olympic stadium at the official opening of the Games. The torch is then used to light the Olympic flame that burns continuously in the stadium for the duration of the contest. On March 30, as Chinese Olympic officials proudly watched their country's athletes light the torch in Olympia, a group of Tibetan exiles and their supporters disrupted the proceedings, loudly condemning China's repression and demanding an

end to Chinese rule. They also called on the international community to use its influence to pressure China to change its policies toward Tibet. Some went so far as to urge an international boycott of the Games as a means of indicating the world's displeasure with China's actions.

As the torch relay made its way to other world cities, the protesters grew in numbers and determination. Tibetan exiles were joined by others in Australia, India, Europe, and North and South America who sympathized with their cause and criticized China's poor human rights record in Tibet and elsewhere. In San Francisco, the demonstrations were so large that the torch relay had to be rerouted through another part of the city, where crowds were thinner. Paris, London, and New Delhi were also scenes of serious protests in the streets.

But along with the Tibetans and their supporters, the relay also attracted a number of people of Chinese descent who were there to show their support for the Games. To them, the demonstrations were a mark of disrespect for their country's plans to host the world's athletes in Beijing in the summer of 2008. Winning the right to hold the Summer Games was a tremendous boost to China in its efforts to establish itself as a major world power. Its leaders wanted to use the occasion to showcase their country as a modern industrialized nation reaching out to the world for increased cultural and commercial ties. Canada, along with many Western nations, regards China as a significant market for its goods.

While China's rulers are opening up their country to international commerce and radically reforming its state-controlled economy along capitalist lines, they are reluctant to extend significant political freedoms to their people. China

Further Research

Learn more about Falun Gong and the reasons why the Chinese government outlawed this religious group. The Web site of the organization Religious Tolerance at www.religioustolerance.org/falungong.htm is one place to start.

Quote

"I don't anticipate any kind of a boycott of the Games themselves. . . . Experience would suggest that such boycotts are generally not effective and really, in the end, only harm the athletes involved who have trained for so many years to compete in these events."
— Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Canadian Press, April 8, 2008)

remains a single-party communist regime, where opposition to the government is not permitted, and strict limits continue to be imposed on the media. Religious groups that have incurred the disfavour of the communist rulers, such as the Falun Gong sect, have been severely persecuted. Most of the international criticism of China's poor human rights record is directed at its ongoing repression in Tibet, which has become a popular international human rights cause embraced by a number of prominent celebrities in the United States and elsewhere. But other non-Chinese national minorities, such as the Uighurs, an Islamic people who live in the western province of Xinjiang, also live under harsh occupation and long for greater autonomy, largely ignored by international public opinion.

China's enormous potential as a global economic, political, and military superpower in the 21st century is one of the most important factors in international relations today. Many countries are anxious to increase their commercial ties to this emerging giant that contains the world's largest market for consumer goods and is also becoming a major exporter of manufactured products. For this reason, they are extremely reluctant to place their lucrative business connections with the country in jeopardy by orchestrating an Olympic boycott that would surely prompt reprisals from

China. At the same time, however, violations of human rights, both against groups like the Tibetans and the Chinese people themselves, have been difficult to ignore.

Many important political figures, such as U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, have publicly endorsed the Dalai Lama's call for complete religious and cultural autonomy for Tibet and have harshly condemned China's policies there. For its part, the Canadian government expressed concern about the suppression of demonstrations in Tibet, but the Prime Minister was also publicly skeptical about the possibility that this country would support a boycott of the Olympics. With the Summer Games only a few months away, it appeared highly unlikely that many countries would keep their athletes home as a gesture of solidarity with the Tibetan protesters. But with the torch relay about to enter neighbouring Nepal, where a large Tibetan exile community lives, the potential for more serious protests remained great. It was quite likely that Tibetans, and others opposed to China's policies, would continue to use the pre-Olympic activities as a venue to vent their anger and frustration. And how all this would affect China's hopes to stage one of the best Summer Games in the history of the modern Olympics remained to be seen.

To Consider

1. Why are many people around the world angry with China over its policies toward Tibet?
2. How have they used the Olympic torch relay as a means of indicating their displeasure?
3. Why is China such an important player in the international community today?
4. Why are some Tibetans and others calling on the world to boycott the Beijing Olympics in August 2008? How likely is this to happen?
5. Why are the Olympics such an important event for China and its rulers?
6. What are your personal views on the Olympics and the China-Tibet issue?

TIBET, CHINA, AND THE OLYMPICS

Video Review

Respond to the following questions as you watch the video.

1. Record the reasons why China is pleased to be hosting the Olympics.

2. Record some of the reasons why protestors tried to disrupt the Olympic torch relay.

3. How did Tibet come to be controlled by China?

4. How has Chinese control hurt Tibet and Tibetans?

5. In what ways has China helped Tibet?

6. How are Olympic athletes affected by the protests and calls for a boycott?

7. Summarize the Dalai Lama's position on China hosting the 2008 Olympic Games.

8. Briefly outline your personal views on an Olympic boycott of China.

Follow-up

In a small group, list the arguments for and against a boycott of the Olympics. Consider some of the following questions:

1. Who would a boycott hurt?
2. What would be the short- and long-term impact of a boycott on China?
3. What other options could be used to encourage China to reform its human rights record?

TIBET, CHINA, AND THE OLYMPICS

Tibet: A Profile

Tibet is a mountainous country that occupies one of the world's most forbidding terrains, the rugged Himalayan Mountain range. Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world, is located on the border of Tibet and Nepal. It has long been regarded as a mystical, mysterious place, home to a distinctive form of the Buddhist religion led by a legendary figure known as the Dalai Lama. In the 1930s, a popular novel and film called *Lost Horizon* portrayed it as Shangri-la, a utopian society where everyone lived a life of perfect contentment and spiritual health. Tibet's average altitude is 4 000 metres above sea level, and it is sometimes known as "the roof of the world" because of its high elevation.



Tibet is located in western China. How might the country's location contribute to its distinct culture and traditions?

Today, Tibet is officially known as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and is a province of China. But many Tibetans, including the large exile community opposed to Chinese rule, consider that their traditional homeland includes significant territories that once formed part of Tibet but have since been incorporated into China proper. Tibetans call their country Bo, while the Chinese name for the area is Xizang. The Tibetan language, which contains a number of regional dialects, is completely different from Han Chinese, and variations of it are also spoken in the neighbouring countries of Nepal, Bhutan, and the northern parts of India. The total land area of Tibet is 1.2 million square kilometres.

Tibet's climate is harsh and severely dry, with limited rain and snowfall, despite its high elevation. This is a result of the rain shadow effect of the high mountains that restricts precipitation in the region. Vegetation is sparse. The capital city is Lhasa, where the magnificent Potala Palace, a UNESCO World Heritage site that was once the home of the Dalai Lama, is located. There are many important Buddhist temples in the city, which Tibetans regard as their spiritual capital.

Tibet is one of the poorer parts of China, with an annual GDP of 13.9 billion Chinese yuan, or USD\$1.8-billion in 2001. To stimulate the economy and raise living standards, the Chinese government exempts Tibetans from paying taxes and subsidizes 90 per cent of government expenditures. The economy is largely agricultural, and because of the lack of arable land, animal husbandry is the main activity. Sheep, cattle, goats, camels, horses, and yaks

Did You Know . . .

Two Hollywood films about the Dalai Lama and Tibet increased the popularity of the region for Westerners. But the films, *Kundun* and *Seven Years in Tibet*, were banned in China.

are the most important livestock raised in Tibet. Crops such as barley, wheat, buckwheat, rye, potatoes, and some fruits and vegetables are grown where conditions permit.

In recent years, Tibet has become an increasingly popular international tourist destination. Many in the West are fascinated with its religion and culture, and a number of films have been made about the region. Many Tibetans, especially in Lhasa, now make their living from the hospitality industry, working in hotels and restaurants and selling traditional handicrafts such as clothing, jewellery, rugs, and wooden carvings. However, tourists are limited to visiting only a few parts of the TAR, and Chinese officials strictly limit contact between foreign travellers and native Tibetans, whose traditional culture is showcased in a “folkloric” manner, as a relic of a distant past.

In 2006, the Chinese government inaugurated the Golmud-Lhasa railway, making travel between China and Tibet much easier. Chinese officials promote the link, claiming it will lead to greater economic development in Tibet. But many Tibetans oppose it because they believe it will enable many more Han Chinese settlers to reach the region and establish permanent residency there. For over a decade, it has been the policy of the Chinese government to encourage ethnic Chinese immigration to Tibet, in order to promote greater economic development. Many Tibetans, however, regard this as a move to dilute and eventually eliminate their culture and traditions by swamping the region with Chinese settlers.

According to the most recent census, taken in 2000, ethnic Tibetans constituted about 93 per cent of the TAR’s total population of 2 616 329. However, the political, commercial, and economic influence of the Han

Chinese residents of Tibet is vastly disproportionate to their numbers. This is especially true in Lhasa and other main cities, where Han Chinese control most of the businesses and important governmental positions. For this reason, they were especially targeted for violent reprisals at the hands of ethnic Tibetans during the March 2008 riots. Despite the fact that Han Chinese immigration to Tibet is continuing at an increasing pace, the ethnic Tibetan birth rate is far higher than that of the Chinese, whose population increase is restricted by the government’s “one child” policy, which does not apply to Tibetans.

Many Tibetans, especially the large exile community that followed its leader, the Dalai Lama, to India following the Chinese invasion of 1959, strongly oppose the presence of Han Chinese residents in their land, believing them to be agents of a foreign and uninvited occupation. But Chinese officials claim that their rule has actually benefited ethnic Tibetans, who mostly lived as nomads in dire poverty before the Chinese occupation. Schools were practically non-existent, health care was of very poor quality, rates of infant mortality were high, and life expectancy was low. Women were treated in a very subservient fashion. In addition, the rule of Buddhist lamas, or monks, including the Dalai Lama himself, had done practically nothing to encourage the development of the economy or the modernization of Tibetan society. Even the present Dalai Lama, who strongly opposes Chinese cultural dominance in Tibet and restrictions on Buddhist religious observances, concedes that the occupation has led to significant economic and social advances for his people, which he does not want to see reversed in the future.

Tibetan Buddhism is a distinctive form of the religion that arrived from

Further Research

The official web site of the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet can be accessed at www.dalailama.com. On this site you'll find a collection of recent speeches and teachings.

India during the seventh century CE. The current Dalai Lama, the 14th person to hold this exalted religious title, was born Tenzin Gyatso in eastern Tibet in 1935. As a young boy, he was recognized as the reincarnation of the previous Dalai Lama and taken from his village to the Potala Palace in Lhasa, where he was instructed in Buddhist teachings and formally installed at the age of four. During the Second World War, two Austrian mountaineers, Heinrich Harrer and Peter Aufschnaiter, befriended the young Dalai Lama and imparted to him an extensive knowledge of European language and culture. This was to stand him in good stead following his exile

from Tibet in 1959 in the wake of the Chinese invasion.

The Dalai Lama is regarded by his followers as the “Ocean of Wisdom,” or the embodiment of compassion and Buddhist holiness. He has many followers worldwide, among Tibetans and Westerners who find his message of spiritual tranquility and non-violence in the face of oppression extremely attractive. But to some younger Tibetans, his perceived willingness to accept Chinese rule over Tibet in return for cultural and religious freedom and his total opposition to violent forms of protest remain a problem.

Inquiry

With a partner, respond in your notebook to the following questions. Be prepared to share your work with the class.

1. Why has Tibet exerted such a fascination over the minds of many people in the West since the 1930s?
2. Why do many Tibetans, both inside and outside the country, resent the Chinese occupation of their homeland?
3. What benefits do the Chinese claim they have brought to Tibet since assuming control over it in 1959?
4. Why is Tibet such a poor region of China, compared with other parts of the country?
5. Why is the Dalai Lama such a significant figure to many Tibetans? What disagreements do some Tibetans have with his approach to dealing with China?

TIBET, CHINA, AND THE OLYMPICS

A Tibetan Timeline

7th-9th century Namri Songzren and his family unite Tibet and conquer neighbouring territories, signing a peace treaty establishing the borders with China in 822.

1624 The first contact between Tibetans and Europeans occurs as Portuguese missionaries establish a church in Lhasa; they are expelled by the lamas in 1745.

1724 The Chinese appoint a resident commissioner to administer Tibet and assume direct control of the two eastern provinces of Kham and Amdo.

1750 A rebellion breaks out against the Chinese commissioners, which is suppressed, resulting in a Chinese military occupation. The Dalai Lama is permitted to administer the region under the supervision of the Chinese commissioner.

1788-91 China sends troops to Tibet to repulse invaders from neighbouring Nepal.

1850s As Russia and Britain vie for control of Central Asia, the Chinese government expels all foreigners from Tibet and closes the border.

1904 The Dalai Lama flees a British military expedition led by Colonel Francis Younghusband. Britain forces Tibet to sign a trade deal eliminating Russian competition.

1907 Britain and Russia recognize Chinese authority in Tibet.

1908-9 The Dalai Lama flees to India after China dispatches troops to Tibet.

1912 The Dalai Lama returns to power, proclaiming his country's independence. No foreign government recognizes Tibet.

1935 The man who will become the 14th Dalai Lama is born to a poor peasant

family in northeastern Tibet. At the age of two he is declared the reincarnation of the 13th Dalai Lama and taken to Lhasa.

1949 Communist forces under Mao Zedong take power in China and vow to "liberate" Tibet.

1950 China enforces its claim to Tibet, while the Dalai Lama, now 15 years old, becomes the head of state.

1951 Tibet is forced to sign a treaty with China, called the "Seventeen Point Agreement," permitting the establishment of Chinese governmental and military headquarters in Lhasa in return for a guarantee of Tibetan cultural autonomy and religious freedom.

1950s Armed resistance to Chinese rule begins in eastern Tibet.

1954 The Dalai Lama holds talks with Mao, who refuses to honour his part of the Seventeen Point Agreement.

1959 Chinese troops invade Tibet to end the growing resistance, causing thousands of deaths. The Dalai Lama and his officials flee to Dharamsala in northern India, where they establish a government in exile. They are soon followed by thousands of other Tibetans.

1965 China establishes the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) in the areas it had not previously incorporated into China proper.

1966 Many Tibetan monasteries are destroyed and monks and nuns persecuted as the anti-religious "Cultural Revolution" unleashed by Mao reaches Tibet.

1971 Foreign visitors are permitted to travel to Tibet, after an eight-year ban.

1970s and 80s Following the end of the Cultural Revolution, China's more

moderate rulers ease repression in Tibet, but also promote greater Han Chinese immigration into the region. An open-door policy is introduced to reform the economy but block any moves toward greater autonomy.

1989 The Dalai Lama is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and uses the occasion to call for a dialogue with Chinese leaders to resolve the Tibet problem peacefully.

1995 The Dalai Lama names a six-year-old boy, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, as the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, the second most important figure in Tibetan Buddhism. China places the boy under house arrest and names another child, Gyancaïn Norbu, as their officially approved Panchen Lama.

2006 The new Golmud-Lhasa railway is opened, which Chinese officials promote as a step toward greater economic development for Tibet. Many Tibetans

regard it as a threat to their culture, since it will enable more Chinese immigrants to arrive.

2007 Tibet enjoys a record tourist boom, with over four million foreigners visiting.

2008 Five months before the opening of the Summer Olympic Games in Beijing, the worst riots in two decades erupt in Lhasa and other Tibetan cities. Mobs of ethnic Tibetans attack government offices and assault Han Chinese residents. Meanwhile, exiled Tibetans and their supporters disrupt the progress of the Olympic torch relay, an important preliminary event to the Games, in an effort to draw attention to Chinese repression in Tibet and their demand for greater freedom. In response to growing international protests, China announces that it is willing to hold talks with representatives of the Dalai Lama in order to resolve their differences.

Analysis

1. What are the long-term historic roots of the current conflict between China and Tibet?
2. Why do some Tibetans believe they have a legitimate right to be recognized as an independent state? Why does China reject this claim?
3. What role has the Dalai Lama played in efforts to resolve the China-Tibet dispute without resorting to violence? How successful has he been to date?
4. How have Tibetan exile groups used the occasion of the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing to draw international attention to the Tibet issue?

TIBET, CHINA, AND THE OLYMPICS

Two Views of the Tibet Protests

When violent protests erupted in Tibet against Chinese rule, there were a variety of responses to the events. The quotations that follow reflect very different opinions on the events. Read each carefully and respond to the questions that follow.

“I am inside a monastery right now. The telephone lines have been cut off. The monks outside the monastery were shouting ‘Long live the Dalai Lama!’ This morning the students of a middle school went out and protested. There were arrests, and many Tibetans went to the police station to demand the release of those detained. Two girls were shot and wounded. It is tense and frightening . . .”
— anonymous Tibetan, Hongyan County, Sichuan province, China

“We did this to symbolize the hopes and aspirations of Tibetan people from under the dark period of Chinese rule. During the vigil, the police came and dispersed us. We are protesting for many reasons. We know this is the Olympic year for Beijing. Nations will come to China to represent themselves. We are protesting like this to express our national identity.” — Tibetan who wishes to remain anonymous, Lhasa

“The situation feels very tense, and there is a heavy military presence. I saw large convoys moving toward Lhasa. . . . We are very worried about arbitrary arrests. We believe that the people recorded on Chinese television will be arrested. We are very worried about the lack of Western people and journalists around Lhasa.” — Tibetan who wishes to remain anonymous, outside Lhasa

Source: “Tibetans describe continuing unrest,” BBC News, March 17, 2008: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7300312.stm>

“I support my government on this issue. The Dalai Lama is the main cause of the suffering of both Tibetans and Chinese in Tibet. He could stop the protesters but he doesn’t. He gave the people who remain loyal to him the wrong ideas and asked kind-hearted people to risk their lives for his political interests. Our government had to send in the troops to protect our people and make society stable.” — Zhang Yi Fan, student, Beijing

“I think Tibet is a small problem that can be resolved. The Chinese economy and Chinese society is very stable now. The economy is growing fast. Life for people all across China and all its regions is getting better and better. I think China needs its stability and so I think it is fine for the army to go into Tibet. Every government should show its force and its ability to control troubled situations . . .” — Yu Fu-Ming, company manager, Beijing

“The timing is very sensitive. China is due to have the Olympic Games this year. I think this is why those people chose this time to riot. Many are unsatisfied with the Chinese government and the country. They want to cause riots, maybe even engage in some terrorist activities before, during, or after the Olympic Games. These people know that it is a huge thing for China to have the Olympics. The world’s attention is on us. It is a good opportunity for them to take advantage. Honestly, I think these are the actions of a small number of people. But it makes me angry. I think it makes most Chinese people angry. Everyone has their own problems, but I do not think that such violent acts are a good option.” — Jin Jie Chen, lawyer, Shanghai

Source: “Chinese react to violence in Tibet,” BBC News, March 17, 2008: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7301222.stm>

TIBET, CHINA, AND THE OLYMPICS

The Troubled Olympic Torch Relay

Note

Renowned German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, infamous for her glorification of the Nazi regime, began her epic documentary of the Berlin Games, *Olympiad*, with the torch-lighting ceremony. What is ironic about the fact that the first torch relay took place prior to the opening of the Nazi-sponsored Berlin Olympics in 1936?

The Olympic torch relay is one of the most important events leading up to the opening of the Summer Games. It began prior to the Berlin Olympics in 1936, when Nazi officials in Germany wanted to highlight the ancient Greek heritage of the Games for propaganda reasons. This was the first time the torch was lit in Olympia, the site of the ancient Olympic Games, and relayed by athletes from different countries to the stadium of the host country—in this case Germany.

Much has changed for this ceremony since 1936. In 2008, the torch was lit in Olympia on March 28. A famous Greek actress, Maria Nafpliotou, dressed as an ancient Greek high priestess, ignited the torch of the first bearer, Alexandros Nikolaidis, a Greek silver-medal winning athlete from the 2004 Athens Games.

He then handed it to Luo Xuejuan, a Chinese Olympic swimmer, symbolizing the transfer from Greece to China. From there, the torch was to be relayed across six continents, covering a total distance of 137 000 kilometres, the longest in the history of the event.

After the official lighting of the torch, it went to Beijing on March 31, to begin its route around the world. On the way, it was to visit the cities of the fabled Silk Road, an ancient trade route that once linked China with the Middle East and Europe. There were also plans to carry the flame to the peak of Mount Everest, the world's tallest mountain. The theme of the relay was "Journey of Harmony," symbolizing the goal of promoting world peace through athletic competition. This was one of the original ideas behind the creation of the modern Olympic Games.

But the early stages of the relay were marked by controversy and serious protest, as exiled Tibetans and their

supporters in various countries used the arrival of the torch to demonstrate their opposition to China's occupation of Tibet and other human rights abuses. The initial lighting ceremony itself in Olympia was dramatically disrupted by three members of the human rights group Reporters Without Borders (www.rsf.org), who eluded tight security to interrupt a speech by Liu Qi, the head of the Beijing Olympic Organizing Committee. In Athens, during the official hand-over of the torch from Greek to Chinese officials, a group of demonstrators unfurled a banner proclaiming "Free Tibet," leading to many arrests. These protests touched off other, more violent incidents, most notably in Nepal, home to a large Tibetan exile community.

As the torch relay continued through a number of major world cities, the protests grew in intensity. In London, the official route was changed to avoid demonstrators. In Paris, protesters succeeded in extinguishing the torch, a highly symbolic act. San Francisco was the scene of more protests, with celebrities such as actor Richard Gere and Nobel Prize-winning South African human rights activist Archbishop Desmond Tutu leading the demonstrations. Again, the route was changed at the last minute to prevent clashes between pro-Tibet activists and Chinese-Americans who were there to show their support for the Games. When the relay reached New Delhi, India, the country where the Dalai Lama has established his government in exile, officials shortened the route and restricted the activities of the "Olympic Holy Flame Protection Unit," an elite guard of Chinese People's Liberation

Further Research

Visit CBC News at www.cbc.ca/news/interactives/map-olympic-torch/ to view the Olympic torch route and view photos taken of the protestors and supporters.

Army soldiers assigned to defend the torch from attacks.

By the time the torch relay reached Asia, pro-Chinese groups had been able to organize counter-protests to show that not everyone opposed the Games and took the side of the Tibetan exiles and their supporters. On April 24, as the flame was carried through the streets of Canberra, Australia, it was met by cheers from the large Chinese community there, although pro-Tibet demonstrators were also in attendance. From there, the torch relay was scheduled to visit a number of

other Asian locations, including Hong Kong and Macau, two former British and Portuguese colonies that had been transferred to Chinese rule in 1997. However, negotiations to permit the torch to enter Taiwan had broken down over disagreements between Chinese and Taiwanese officials regarding the playing of the two countries' national anthems at the ceremonies. China claims Taiwan as part of its territory, but the current government regards it as a separate country.

Questions

1. Why is the Olympic torch relay such an important symbolic preliminary event to the opening of the Olympic Games?

2. How have protesters succeeded in disrupting the torch relay since it began in Greece?

3. Do you agree with the protesters who are trying to disrupt the relay? Why or why not?

TIBET, CHINA, AND THE OLYMPICS

Activity: Considering a Boycott

Definition

A *boycott* is a method of protest that involves abstaining from participation without causing direct damage.

A boycott is way to demonstrate opposition to a policy or event and to increase public awareness for the cause of the protest.

Web Sites

Here are some Web sites that may be useful to you in researching the topic and preparing your letters:

- Official site of the Tibetan government in exile, www.tibet.com
- Official site of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, <http://en.beijing2008.cn>
- Official site of the Chinese government, <http://english.gov.cn>
- Official site of the Canadian Olympic Committee, www.olympic.ca
- CBC Archives, www.cbc.ca/archives

Despite the wishes of many competing athletes and followers of the Olympic Games that the contest should remain focused on sports and be above politics, previous Olympics have been affected by boycotts over international political disagreements. In 1976 Canada felt the effects of one of the first boycotts when it hosted the Summer Games in Montreal. A number of African countries chose not to send athletes to participate in protest over the fact that the New Zealand team had been involved in contests with South Africa, then under an Olympic ban because of its racist apartheid system.

Four years later, practically every Western country, led by the United States, boycotted the Moscow Olympics to demonstrate their condemnation of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan a few months earlier. In retaliation, when the next Olympics were held, in Los Angeles in 1984, almost every country belonging to the then-Soviet bloc also declined to send teams. These Olympics were tarnished by political disputes, and those attending the Games were cheated of the opportunity to see the world's very best athletes in competition. Since that time, the Games held in Seoul, Korea (1988), Barcelona, Spain (1992), Atlanta, Georgia (1996), Sydney, Australia (2000), and Athens, Greece (2004), have been free of boycotts. In fact, the number of participating countries has actually increased due to the break-up of the former Soviet Union into 15 different republics and the fact that South Africa is now permitted to compete after finally ending the apartheid system.

Because of bitter memories of past Olympic boycotts, and also fearful of displeasing China, an emerging global superpower, most Western countries, including Canada, are extremely reluctant to even consider a boycott of the August 2008 Beijing Games over the Tibet issue and concerns about China's human rights record. Even though many of these countries have been very critical of Chinese policies in Tibet and its restrictions on political, cultural, and religious freedoms at home, there is some doubt that an Olympic boycott would have any influence on that country's leaders and communist regime. In fact, there are concerns that such a move might trigger serious economic and trade consequences at a time when many Western nations are looking to China as an important new commercial partner.

Despite this hesitation, pro-Tibet groups in many Western countries have loudly called for a boycott of the Games. The Dalai Lama, the exiled leader of the Tibetan people, does not support such a move, but many younger Tibetans and their supporters abroad have urged it as a matter of conscience.

Canada's official policy, stated by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, as of the end of April 2008 was that it was unlikely to support or participate in any planned boycott of the Beijing Games. Do you agree with this position?

Your task is to write a letter to the Prime Minister, stating your views on the issue of China's occupation of Tibet and its human rights record, and whether or not you think that a boycott of the Beijing Summer Olympics would be an appropriate response on the part of Canada to these issues. Show your letter to your teacher before you e-mail it to the Prime Minister at pm@pm.gc.ca or mail it to Office of the Prime Minister, 80 Wellington Street, Ottawa K1A 0A2.

No postage is necessary.