Sparkling a Protest

China’s crackdown on dissent has led activists to protest the running of the Olympic torch

By DAVID VON DREHLE

The traditional global relay carrying the Olympic torch to the site of the Games is supposed to convey the inextinguishable vigor of the Olympic spirit. But the Chinese are finding it instead a symbolic disaster. The running of the torch in London in early April was marred by attempts by human rights protesters to extinguish its fire. In Paris the ceremony became an outright farce: security officials doused the flame twice in the face of demonstrations to block its progress, and wound up driving it to the end-of-day handoff ceremony at Charléty Stadium on the edge of the city when the tormented relay was canceled at mid-course. As the torch moves on to San Francisco and Buenos Aires before heading back to Africa and Asia, the organizers of this summer’s Beijing Games are facing a grim prospect: that the protests denouncing China’s human rights record in Tibet and elsewhere could mount as the torch continues its 85,000-mile, 20-nation voyage.

More than 3,000 French police and security forces formed what was touted as a “hermetic bubble” to protect torch carriers from any intrusion, but the relay came under immediate pressure from well-organized protesters. Just minutes after the 17-mile relay began at the Eiffel Tower, demonstrators carrying Tibetan flags and chanting anti-Chinese slogans moved in so tightly around the torch that officials took it into a bus for protection. Its flame was ultimately extinguished at least twice for what French officials called “technical reasons.” Efforts by police to back activists away from the Olympic cortege at times became violent, as did clashes between protesters and pro-China spectators. An unknown number of people were arrested for disrupting the Paris relay; 37 were taken into custody on similar charges in London.

The relay was eventually cut short, as the flame couldn’t hold up against the determination of the demonstrators drawn to it. Hundreds of other activists gathered at the Trocadero esplanade across from the Eiffel Tower to show their support for the Tibetan people during a day of events that was to wrap up with concerts in the evening. Activists in Paris, like their peers in London the previous day, turned an event intended to highlight China’s growing political and economic skill into a police-harnessed reflection of how China treats dissent.

“The Chinese have made sure that for a few hours, Paris will look like Tiananmen Square,” noted Robert Menard, head of the Reporters Without Frontiers group, before the Paris protests he helped organize. “I think it’s shameful.”

The raucous London and Paris legs appear to have surprised Chinese officials. French popular concern over human rights conditions in China took root only following the brutal suppression of unrest in Tibet last month. Images of that violence prepared the ground for groups like Reporters Without Frontiers, which have called on the French government to use the Beijing Games as a lever to pressure China to increase civil liberties and press freedom. It was in the wake of that spreading disquiet in France that President Nicolas Sarkozy became the first Western leader to suggest he might consider a boycott of the opening ceremonies to protest China’s stance on human rights and Tibet. The Beijing Olympic torch show, it seems, is only just heating up.

Questions

1. Why are activists protesting the running of the Olympic torch?
2. Who is the first Western leader to state that his country might boycott the Beijing Olympics?