

# What an Olympic glow can't mask

By Minky Worden  
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COPENHAGEN --

Corks popped this month in Copenhagen, with Rio de Janeiro voted as host city for the 2016 Summer Games and the convening of the XIII Olympic Congress, the first since 1994. Meanwhile, in a dark cell in Fuzhou, a coastal city on the East China Sea, Ji Sizun has no cause to celebrate. The 59-year-old [legal activist](#) was sentenced to three years in prison in January. His crime? He took the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Chinese government at their word when authorities set up three official protest zones during the Beijing Games and said that any citizen could apply to protest.

In fact, not one of the 77 applications filed by Chinese citizens was accepted. Instead, applicants were detained, harassed or jailed. Two women in their 70s were sentenced to camps to be "reeducated" through forced labor, before an international outcry sprang them. Two days before the Opening Ceremonies of the Beijing Games, IOC President Jacques Rogge told Reuters: "We believe the Games are going to move ahead the agenda of the social and human rights as far as possible; the Games are going to be a force for good."

More than a year later, however, it is clear that awarding the 2008 Games to Beijing actually worsened the human rights climate in China.

Consider: Thousands of Beijing residents were evicted to make way for Olympic construction. The Chinese media and Internet sites remained censored despite the pledges of "complete press freedom" that Beijing made while bidding for the Games. That censorship had deadly consequences during the Olympics, when an enforced news blackout of China's melamine-tainted milk supply may have contributed to the toll of tens of thousands of sick children (six of whom died).

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The Beijing Games led to a deep freeze of civil society development in China and unleashed a wave of xenophobia and nationalism -- especially after protests during the Olympic torch relay -- which gave rise to attacks on foreign journalists and tightened Internet censorship. The unrest in Tibet in February and in Xinjiang in July may have been a byproduct of intense security preparations across the country.

Yet absent from the agenda of the Olympic Congress that just met here was any discussion of how China's Olympics went so wrong in terms of human rights, how Olympic officials failed to anticipate and react to entirely predictable abuses by Chinese authorities, or how to prevent such a debacle in the future. And the false narrative of

success in Beijing could set the stage for similar issues at Russia's 2014 Sochi Games or other host cities.

Why worry now about the Sochi Games? This year alone, several Russian rights activists and journalists have been killed within a few hundred miles of Sochi. The Committee to Protect Journalists [ranks](#) Russia as the world's third-deadliest country for reporters. Seventeen Russian journalists have been killed since 2000. Journalists and citizens know a climate of impunity toward these deaths has been fostered.

Research by Human Rights Watch in Sochi this year has uncovered potential problems that, if unaddressed, could develop into rights violations linked to preparations for the Games. Olympic construction in and near Sochi is a potential source of grave health hazards. One village has been without running water for a year; all of its wells have been shut down because of construction or pollution.

Researchers also observed a depressingly familiar lack of transparency in land expropriations. On just one street in Sochi, for example, residents face the expropriation by local authorities of 119 properties and dozens of plots of land to make room for Olympics-related construction. Residents are given little or no information on compensation or resettlement options, or on how to dispute official appraisal values.

In Copenhagen this month, Human Rights Watch presented its [proposal](#) for institutional reform to monitor host countries' compliance with international human rights norms. We also believe that the IOC should make host city contracts public. Reforms have been made to the Olympic system related to doping, graft and environmental degradation, but only after international embarrassment on a grand scale.

Human Rights Watch is not suggesting that the IOC monitor all human rights in a host country -- that's our job -- just abuses directly tied to or caused by the Games. The lesson of Beijing is that voluntary pledges by host countries don't prevent rights violations. Only by creating a body to monitor human rights violations before, during and after the Games can we ensure that future Olympics won't be tainted by human rights abuses.

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