



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Five stories NBC probably won't cover at the Beijing Olympics

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Religion News Service recently [published](#) the following opinion by Ashwin Verghese of the International Campaign for Tibet.

(RNS) — As the Beijing Winter Olympics get underway, NBC will pull out all the stops to cover heartwarming stories of Team USA, and we'll get an eyeful of the stagecraft put on by the host country to make sure we see athletes making merry and giving their all.

NBC owes the victims of China's oppression equal time.

The Olympics' longtime U.S. broadcast partner, NBC, is under fire from both [Democratic](#) and [Republican](#) lawmakers, who want the network to fulfill its responsibility as a member of the media by reporting on China's human rights abuses against Tibetans, Uyghurs, Mongolians and others and resisting China's censorship.

The International Campaign for Tibet, which recently sent its own [open letter to NBC](#), has also received thousands of signatures on a [petition to NBC](#). "The peacock network can't bury its head like an ostrich and pretend that China's repression isn't a core part of these Games," ICT's interim president, Bhuchung K. Tsering, said. "While we all want to cheer on Team USA, China is using the Games as propaganda, so NBC has to provide inclusive coverage on all aspects of issues related to it."

NBC has yet to indicate that it will do so. Instead, one of its executives [said](#) recently, the network "will provide perspective on China's place in the world," but "the athletes do remain the centerpiece of our coverage."

Just in case the perspective segments get lost, here are some of the stories the network should cover during the Olympics — but probably won't.

The missing Panchen Lama and the next Dalai Lama

Most viewers are familiar with the Dalai Lama, the exiled leader of Tibet, but few have heard about the Panchen Lama, another high-ranking Tibetan Buddhist figure. In part that's because just days after the Dalai Lama recognized 6-year-old Gedhun Choekyi Nyima as the reincarnated Panchen Lama in 1995, Chinese authorities [abducted the child and his parents](#). None of them has been seen in public since.

The disappearance of Nyima is a dark omen for Tibet's future, as well as the future of Tibetan Buddhism. After kidnapping Nyima, the atheist Chinese government appointed its own Panchen

Lama, Gyaltzen Norbu, who has been made to serve as a mouthpiece for Beijing rather than a genuine religious teacher.

Likewise, China has already made clear it plans to appoint its own replacement for the Dalai Lama when the time comes. “That’s the end game of China’s decades-long occupation of Tibet,” Tsering said, noting that the [Tibetan Policy and Support Act](#) of 2020 will impose U.S. sanctions on any Chinese officials who try to interfere in the Dalai Lama’s succession.

Destruction of Buddhist statues

According to [reports](#), Chinese authorities recently demolished a 99-foot-tall Buddha statue outside a well-known monastery in a Tibetan region called Drago (Luhuo in Chinese). A few days later, they allegedly destroyed another three-story-high Buddhist statue, along with 45 Buddhist prayer wheels. Sources said that local Tibetans raised funds and received government permission for the construction of the statues, but officials later rescinded their approval and even forced monks and laypeople to watch as their beloved statues were destroyed.

The demolitions reportedly began in mid-December. “If they were willing to do that less than two months before the Olympics began, imagine what they’ll do after the Games leave China,” Tsering said. He added that several Tibetans are believed to have been arrested for leaking information about the demolitions to the outside world.

Lack of access to Tibet

Part of the reason it’s so hard to learn what’s happening in Tibet is because China has clamped down on foreigners’ (including Tibetan Americans’) access to the occupied country. In its recent [report](#) on media freedom in 2021, the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China says that “foreign journalists remain unable to freely visit” the Tibet Autonomous Region, which spans about half of Tibet. The report adds that foreign media also faced harassment in Tibetan areas outside the TAR.

If NBC’s journalists can’t access Tibet, that itself is a story. “China claims that Tibetans are happy under its rule, so it should allow NBC to visit the area and freely interview the local people,” Tsering said. NBC could also speak to the U.S. State Department, which is required under the [Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act](#) of 2018 to ban entry to the U.S. of the Chinese officials responsible for keeping Americans out of Tibet.

Harassment of Tibetan American communities

If NBC can’t enter Tibet during these Games, the network could look right outside its headquarters at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, where in 2020, a New York City police officer was [arrested for allegedly spying on local Tibetan Americans](#) for the Chinese government. The case of the officer, Baimadajie Angwang, highlighted China’s “[transnational repression](#)” of exile communities outside China’s borders, including surveillance, harassment and intimidation of Tibetans, Uyghurs and dissident Chinese.

One of the most notorious examples is [the Dorje Shugden movement](#), a religious sect that received clandestine Chinese support for a large-scale campaign to undermine support for the Dalai Lama around the world. Although activism by Shugden groups slowed after a landmark Reuters investigation in 2015 directly linked them with the Chinese Communist government, the charges against Angwang showed that Chinese officials and intelligence assets are still interested in the potential use of those groups.

Repression after Beijing 2008

Before the last Olympics in Beijing in 2008, two Tibetans, Dhondup Wangchen and Golok Jigme, produced a documentary called "[Leaving Fear Behind](#)" about China's repression in Tibet. The documentary was screened to foreign journalists as the Games began, but the two filmmakers were imprisoned and brutally tortured.

Both Wangchen and Jigme eventually escaped Tibet, and today they continue their activism overseas. Wangchen has spent the last few months traveling throughout Europe to meet with government officials and national Olympic committees, while Jigme, a Buddhist monk, [met former US Vice President Mike Pence](#) at a religious freedom conference in 2018.

"In 2008, prior to the then-Summer Olympic Games, China committed to the International Olympic Committee that it would respect human rights and freedom. But since then, repression in Tibet has skyrocketed," Tsering said. "If NBC really wants to provide perspective on these Games, it could interview Dhondup Wangchen and Golok Jigme to hear what these Olympics will mean for the future of people living under China's rule."

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