

Nepal readies Olympic team despite criticism over Tibetans

Undeterred by criticism worldwide, Nepal continued to ruthlessly snuff out protests by Tibetan refugees and said it would send its best athletes to the controversial Olympic Games in China even as rights watchdogs asked Nepal Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala not to tarnish the nation's image with the brutal crackdown.

Amnesty International and International Rights Watch (HRW) became the first organisations to lodge an official protest with the Nepal government over the brutal suppression of peaceful protests by Tibetans that began last month.

'Nepal police have arbitrarily arrested and detained over 1,500 people both during and since the demonstrations and in order to restrict expression and movement,' the two rights organisations said Tuesday in a joint letter sent to Koirala.

'Police have provided no legal justification for the arrests and detentions either to detainees or to national and international human rights organisations.'

It said the use of unnecessary and excessive use of force during arrests, as well as ill treatment during arrests and detention had been documented.

'We are particularly concerned by increasing evidence of police use of sexual and other forms of assault, including of minors, during arrests, violating the right to physical integrity,' said Catherine Baber, acting Asia director of Amnesty and Sophie Richardson, Asia advocacy director at HRW.

They have reminded Nepal that deportation threats to the unarmed, peaceful protesters, who include elderly women and nuns, constitute a serious violation of Nepal's international human rights obligations.

'China has been cited by the UN's Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment for its abuses of political dissidents in China, and those who have been protesting Chinese rule in Tibet will almost certainly be treated as dissidents,' the letter to Nepal's government said.

'As a party to the ICCPR (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) and the Convention Against Torture, Nepal must uphold Article 3, which prohibits the deportation of individuals to countries where they may face torture. Customary international law also prohibits refoulement to such situations.'

With just nine days left for a critical election, the letter said Nepal should immediately restore the rights of freedom of assembly, expression and movement, by allowing Tibetans to go about their daily lives and carry out peaceful protests without fear of arrests or threat of deportation.

'Should the Nepal police continue to engage in conduct that was condemned by all of the current governing parties, Nepali human rights defenders, and the international community, during the People's Movement of 2005-2006, it will betray its own record of restoring in April 2006 fundamental civil and political rights,' the rights bodies said.

On March 10, the Tibetan diaspora worldwide began peaceful protests to mark the 49th anniversary of a failed uprising in Tibet to end Chinese subjugation.

The protests have continued in Nepal in front of the UN office and Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu with the demonstrators asking for a free investigation into the severe crackdown in Tibet last month in which over 10 people have died.

Nepal, anxious to please its giant northern neighbour China, says it supports the One China policy that claims Tibet is an integral part of the communist republic and will not allow any anti-China protest on its soil.

As a sign of solidarity, it has also halted all expeditions to Mt Everest, the world's highest peak, from its territory till the Chinese climbers carry the Olympic torch to the top of the 8,848m high peak.

Moreover, the Nepal Olympic Committee has begun grooming its best athletes to take part in the Games in Beijing.

Besides its taekwondo star Deepak Bista, two athletes and an equal number of swimmers, Nepal is also vying to get a wild card entry either in shooting or boxing.

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