

China parades Olympic torch in tense Tibet

The Olympic torch was paraded through Lhasa, the capital of China's Tibet region, under tight security and surveillance Saturday.

At the beginning of the torch-lighting ceremony, hundreds of onlookers stood for a minute of silence in memory of the victims of the tragic earthquake in China's Sichuan province last month.

The relay travelled along Lhasa's Beijing Road and passed a square in front of the Potala Palace, the former seat of the exiled Dalai Lama.

State television showed small crowds of spectators lining the route with national flags during the highly organised event.

Hundreds of police were on the streets on the eve of the relay Friday, part of the route was fenced off, a permit system was used for spectators and phone calls were blocked or monitored, according to Matt Whitticase of the London-based Free Tibet Campaign. He quoted contacts in Lhasa.

Nicole Boellhof of German broadcaster ARD said there was an 'atmosphere of fear' in city amid a 'massive military presence' Saturday.

Fences and anti-terrorist nail boards were used to keep vehicles and pedestrians away from the torch parade, and groups of paramilitary police stood at the entrances to many city centre streets, Boellhof said by telephone from Lhasa.

Most shops were closed and local residents were reportedly told to stay indoors during the parade, she said. Boellhof said she saw no monks or pilgrims on Friday near the Jokhang temple, the most important Tibetan Buddhist site in Lhasa, which is normally full of worshippers.

'With the region flooded by security forces and largely sealed off to tourists and journalists following the March demonstrations, taking the torch to Tibet is a highly politicised gesture of control,' Sharon Hom, the director of US-based Human Rights in China, said in a statement on Saturday.

'This provocative decision with the blessing of the International Olympic Committee could aggravate tensions and undermine the fragile process to find a peaceful long-term solution for Tibet and the region,' Hom said.

The government late Friday said it had released 1,157 Tibetans involved in rioting in Lhasa in March. Another 116 people remained in custody and 42 had already been convicted of crimes including arson, robbery and 'gathering to assault state organs', the official Xinhua news agency said.

The Beijing Olympic organizing committee confirmed this week that it had cut the torch relay in Tibet from three days to one day, but it gave no reason for the change.

Exiled Tibetan groups and their supporters also accused the Chinese government of taking the Olympic torch to Tibet, including a separate leg last month to the summit of Mount Everest, to reaffirm its sovereignty over the region.

The government suspended visits by foreign tour groups to the Tibet Autonomous Region in March, and paramilitary police have also imposed severe restrictions on travel by foreign journalists to other Tibetan areas where protests erupted.

The region has always been closed to foreign journalists while tourists need a special permit in addition to a Chinese visa, and must register with a travel agency.

But on Friday the government said it would take journalists from 29 media organizations, including ARD, to cover the relay Saturday as well as the 'social and economic development' of the region before returning Sunday to Beijing.

The trip is one of a handful of such visits organised by the government to the region since anti-Chinese protests and rioting in many Tibetan areas of the country in March and April.

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