

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE MOVEMENT



Darfur Supporters Have Much to Learn from Tibet Activists

By John Morlino

Each vowed to have an unyielding presence at the 2008 Olympics — exacting a price from the Chinese government for its flagrant support of a genocidal regime in Africa, as well as its decades-long occupation of Tibet. Yet, by mirroring the international community's timid response to the ongoing violence in western Sudan, Darfur supporters failed to hold a candle to Tibet protesters at this year's Summer Games.

Courage is the Difference

Save for former Sudanese “Lost Boy” Lopez Lomong’s selection as flag bearer for the U.S. team, Darfur activism was virtually nonexistent at the XXIX Olympiad. This, despite a highly publicized eighteen-month campaign that threatened to rain on President Hu Jintao’s spectacular propaganda party if he did not change his ways.

In contrast, dozens of members of Students for a Free Tibet risked arrest — and the distinct possibility of severe physical and/or psychological distress from Chinese authorities — while successfully implementing a daring series of nonviolent direct actions at some of Beijing’s highest-profile locales, including the headquarters of China’s state run (and censor-happy) television network and Tiananmen square.

No Urgency, No Outrage

None of this, however, will raise the eyebrows of anyone who has followed the arc of either campaign. During the past four years, the vast majority of Darfur supporters have consistently displayed a stunning lack of urgency, alternating between “raising awareness” of the crisis (think green wristbands, lawn signs and the

occasional rally or concert); pushing for Congressional measures that do nothing to change the circumstances on the ground for Darfuris still at-risk and deluding themselves in the belief that 26,000 highly-trained peacekeepers will soon be coming to the rescue. Equally disconcerting is the list of strategies universally frowned upon by the leaders of the movement, including (but not limited to) pointed criticism of the CIA’s intelligence-sharing arrangement with their Sudanese counterparts for President Bush’s “war on terror” — an arrangement that many experts believe has severely compromised the administration’s response to the genocide, as well as any mention of the insidious “gentleman’s agreement” between Sudan President Omar al-Bashir and the heads of many African nations (Translation: I won’t make a fuss over your Crimes against Humanity, if you ignore mine).

High Profile vs. Low Profile

The discrepancy in fortitude between these two disparate campaigns can be traced back to April 2007. As China prepared to announce its plan to run the Olympic Torch through Tibet, en route to the summit of Mt. Everest, five activists unfurled a Free Tibet banner at the mountain’s base camp and broadcast the event worldwide, via satellite. Four months later, as the one-year countdown to the Games was about to begin, SFT members rappelled The Great Wall of China, unveiling an enormous “One World, One Dream Free Tibet” banner, accompanied by similar video footage. Finally, in April 2008, while Darfur supporters finalized plans to don t-shirts and carry placards to protest the Torch Run through the streets of San Francisco, SFT activists scaled the Golden Gate Bridge — signature banners in hand — resulting in a *New York Times* cover photo. Intellectual and

technological expertise notwithstanding, these landmark protests, along with the recent nonviolent, direct actions in Beijing, owe their success to the fact that the participants were willing to endure certain arrest, as well as any additional consequences that came their way.

Truth be told, there is little reason to believe that Tibet and Darfur will be free from violence and oppression any time soon. Faced with this stark reality, the primary goal of both campaigns — beyond shaming the international community into taking action to protect citizens being brutalized by their own governments — must be to impart a genuine sense of solidarity and hope to the people they serve. By courageously putting their lives on the line, time and time again, members of Students for a Free Tibet have powerfully conveyed that message to Tibetans around the world.

The people of Darfur deserve the same. ☺

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