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And Now The Golden Question

Was sending the Olympics to China the right move?

By Jack Chang McClatchy Newspapers

BEIJING — The venues were great, the competition was exciting and no major international incident stained the Olympic Games that concluded here Sunday.

Yet was that enough to call these games a success?

That question hung over the Olympics as hundreds of thousands of athletes, journalists and other visitors said goodbye to Beijing, concluding what was the most watched and most competitive Olympics ever.

Everyone agreed that the games were a technical success, but debate continued about whether the International Olympic Committee had honored the Olympic spirit by awarding the games to a country led by an authoritarian government with little taste for dissent or transparency.

Since the 2001 decision by the IOC to bring the games to Beijing, the committee's President Jacques Rogge has repeatedly said the Olympics would open up China and usher in a new era of respect for human rights and press freedoms.

Journalists, human rights activists and even some sporting officials had called such hopes misguided. On Sunday, Rogge confronted those concerns right off the bat at a closing-day IOC session.

"It has been a long journey since our decision in July 2001 to bring the Olympic Games to China," Rogge said, according to an IOC transcript. "But there can now be no doubt that we made the right choice.

"The IOC and the Olympic Games cannot force changes on sovereign nations or solve all the ills of the world. But we can — and we do — contribute to positive change through sport."

Not everyone, however, was repeating that upbeat message this weekend, especially in the wake of what some said was the Chinese government's failure to honor promises made to win the games to allow more freedoms.

In a lead Saturday editorial titled "Beijing's Bad Faith Olympics," The New York Times slammed increased Chinese government repression of political dissent in the run-up to the Olympics and criticized China's refusal to allow protests even in three designated protest zones in Beijing.

The editorial cited the cases of two elderly Chinese women who were sentenced to a year each of re-education through labor last week for applying for a permit to use the protest zones.

"Beijing got what it wanted out of this globally televised spectacular," the editorial read. "It reaped a huge prestige bonanza that it will surely use to promote its international influence and, we fear, further tighten its grip at home."

The athletes praised the 31 new, temporary and existing venues used in the games and said concerns about air pollution largely evaporated as rains cleared the city's notoriously smoggy skies.

Hosting hundreds of thousands of foreigners for more than two weeks was sure to bring benefits, said triathlete Bevan Docherty, who won the bronze medal for New Zealand.

"I think it was a fantastic decision to bring the games here," Docherty said. "It brought the world to China, made the rest of the world understand China and China has understood a little more about the rest of the world."