

SAN FRANCISCO, TIBETANS STAND UP FOR TIBET

By Giovanni Vassallo

The 2008 Beijing Olympics offered a rare opportunity for Tibetans and human rights activists to shine a spotlight on the Chinese government's illegal, unjust occupation of Tibet that has lasted over 50 years. San Francisco (SF) was the sole United States stop on the Beijing Olympic torch relay, with the flame set to pass through on April 9, 2008. This gave San Francisco Team Tibet (SF Team Tibet), a coalition of five California-based Tibetan organizations, an opportunity to galvanize local and international Tibetans, supporters, and San Franciscans and oppose it.

Leaders of SF Team Tibet include: Tibetan Association of Northern California (TANC) President Ngodup Tsering and Secretary Tsering Gyurmey; San Francisco Regional Tibetan Youth Congress (SFRTYC) President Tenzin Dasang and Vice President Youtso Tenzin; Students for Free Tibet (SFT) Board Member Yangchen Lhamo and Regional Coordinator Tenzin Seldon; Committee of 100 for Tibet (C100) President Giovanni Vassallo and Board Member Geoff Lewis; and the Bay Area Friends of Tibet (BAFoT) Secretary Barbara Green and others teamed up to lead the historic San Francisco campaign opposing the Beijing Olympic Torch.

On August 7, 2008, SF Team Tibet led a protest rally and March. It began at the SF Civic Center Plaza facing San Francisco City Hall. Tibetans called on the Chinese government to end its egregious human rights abuses in Tibet and to resolve the issue of Tibet through earnest negotiations with the Dalai Lama or his representatives. SF Team Tibet called on Mayor Gavin Newsom, to say "No" to Beijing's torch, so long as the Chinese government continued its brutal reign in Tibet. Video of the demonstration is available at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ob2nawttKw&eurl=http%3A%2F%2Fsftteamtibet%2Eorg%2F> .

SF Team Tibet organizers delivered a letter to Mayor Newsom's office. It informed him that an Olympic torch under the auspices of the Chinese government "does not represent any values consistent with those of the city of San Francisco, "It went on to explain that:

"There is a brutal repression still going on to clamp down on freedom of opinion and expression in Tibet. Olympics are China's excuse to further harass, arrest, intimidate, coerce, and beat Tibetans and human rights dissidents into silence...Your welcoming of the Olympic torch would suggest ... that you are ready to turn your back on a unique opportunity to promote legitimate international concerns and ... take a stand for justice in Tibet and China".

They marched about another mile to Chinese consulate and held a press conference. Deyden Tethong, of SFT, spoke at the event. Laurel Sutherlin, who had been arrested and released by the Chinese government for assisting SFT demonstrators on Mount

Everest earlier that year, also spoke. SF Team Tibet was not going to allow the Chinese government to promote its propaganda.

TIBETAN UPRISING DAY

Every year Tibetan and Tibet supporters gather to Tibetan National Uprising Day and the 1.2 million Tibetans killed due to the occupation of Tibet. This year, SF Team Tibet used the anniversary to protest the SF Olympic torch relay. 300 members of SF Team Tibet gathered and a large Tibetan flag unfurled over the flight of white stone steps leading into SF City Hall and they held a portrait of the Dalai Lama above the crowd next to banners saying "Olympics in China, Torture in Tibet," and "Truth is our only weapon." They pleaded for the Mayor's help and urged city officials to pass a resolution calling on China to improve conditions for Tibetans in their homeland.

The public was informed of the plan to line the April 9 Olympic torch route to protest. News helicopters flew overhead as the community gathered that evening for a candle light vigil at Union Square, in the heart of San Francisco's financial district.

FREE SPEECH RESTRICTIONS?

On March 12, the SF Chronicle reported that there was "tense times between Beijing and city officials over the possibility of protests along the torch route, especially after a "Free Tibet" rally outside City Hall..." It also reported that the city would restrict free speech during the Olympic torch rally that "despite grumblings from China, the city will provide "free speech" zones at both the opening and closing ceremonies."

SF is often remembered as a great city for promoting human values such as human rights and civil rights. Unbelievably, city officials considered suppressing the voices of dissent or restricting free speech along the torch. News of this plan caused outrage throughout SF amongst those concerned. Was the long arm of China's government attempting to influence local SF policy and silence Tibet's legitimate expression of concern for justice? Tibet groups had long been denied permits to use Civic Center Plaza and had been told that all the large SF gathering squares were on hold for the Mayor's office. A March 18th, a SF Chronicle editorial pointed out that the planned intrusion of free speech rights were "undeserved," and that "Beijing may like these plans, but why should San Francisco?"

CRISIS IN TIBET SPURS RALLIES

In March 2008, Tibetans in Tibet took part in the biggest protests in decades in all three Tibetan provinces of Amdo, Kham, and U-Tsang. SF Team Tibet organizers immediately supported the peaceful protestors, condemned the use of unwarranted force against them, and vowed daily protests and nightly vigils. Starting March 17, SFRTYC led daily protests outside SF City. The Olympic torch was now the symbol of real-time oppression. Chants of "Olympics in China: Torture in Tibet," "Human Rights – In Tibet" "Reject China's bloody torch," and "We will never give up"—reverberated

outside and around city hall every week day until the week the Olympic torch relay was held. Signatures and letters were mailed to Mayor Newsom to seek his support to cancel the torch relay. (See video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S52iOp-4X24&eurl=http://exposebeijing.blogspot.com/>). Organizers met almost daily and often nightly to draw up plans for and various levels of action for the torch passing.

RESOLUTION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

There was an effort to pass a human rights resolution for Tibet at San Francisco City Hall in the lead up to the torch relay. SF Supervisor Chris Daly was approached to sponsor the resolution. He responded positively and he included support for other victims of China's lack of human rights. He presented a resolution -- "commending the Tibetan Freedom Torch and the Global Human Rights Torch Relay and in their efforts to raise awareness regarding human rights violations in China and urging the San Francisco City Representatives accepting the Beijing 2008 Olympic Torch to welcome the Torch in the explicit spirit of Olympism, consistent with the United Nations Charter established in this City, and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights." -- to the SF Board of Supervisors. SF Team Tibet lobbied all the SF supervisors to support it.

Supervisor Carmen Chu did not support the resolution. She chaired the venue for the first vote on the resolution on March 20, 2008. Supervisor Daly presented the legislation. Around 200 people, mostly Tibetans had a chance to provide public testimony and only about four members of the public opposed Daly's resolution. Nevertheless, Chu produced her own resolution, which gutted any critical references to the Chinese government and commended the Beijing Olympic Torch. It passed 2 to 1 in this subcommittee and Supervisor Daly removed his name as sponsor.

Undeterred, Supervisor Daly reintroduced the original resolution to the full board and both resolutions came up for a vote on April 1, 2008 after of a huge rally on the City Hall steps. Chu's resolution failed and Daly's passed 8-3 and called for an international investigation of China's recent crackdown on dissenters in Tibet and encouraged the city's official representative at the torch festivities to accept the flame with "alarm and protest."

Representatives of the Chinese government tried to pressure supervisors and met with Mayor in regards to the votes. They had condemned both resolutions which they said would "harm San Francisco-China relations."

Daly later acknowledged that he had been encouraged by Speaker Nancy Pelosi's strong stand against the Chinese government's oppression of Tibetans - calling on President George Bush to boycott the opening Olympic ceremonies in Beijing. Speaker Pelosi called for vigorous protest during the torch relay.

The Mayor's office finally released the details of torch's route. Around 80 torch bearers would be employed for it.

SFT, TANC, and TYC members made numerous banners, placards, and shirts. Volunteers organized web sites for the public, and engaged in a huge public relations campaign. Tibetan bikers rode around Berkeley and SF leafleting about the upcoming events. TANC members hosted hundreds of Tibetans who came from around the United States to attend the April 8-9 events.

MEETING MAYOR GAVIN NEWSOM

Mayor Newsom finally agreed to a meeting. Ngodup Tsering, Tenzin Dasang, Barbara Green, Yangchen Lhamo, and Vassallo met with him on April 3rd. They expressed concerns about Tibetan safety during the torch relay, asked him to support the Tibetan human rights resolution recently passed. He was requested to outreach to the International Olympic Committee to seek their support in canceling the scheduled torch run through Tibet. The Mayor said he would raise concerns to IOC. Later, he called for the cancellation of the Olympic torch relay in Tibet.

SF Team Tibet and the Tibet movement's efforts finally seemed to be effective. Suddenly, there was no need for permits to demonstrate along the route. The city had backed off its plan to require protesters to be caged into the free speech zones.

GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE ACTION FOR TIBET

On Monday April 7th three SFT demonstrators scaled cables near the south tower of the Golden Gate Bridge and unfurled two banners. One banner read, "One World, One Dream, Free Tibet 08," a play on the official slogan of this year's Olympic Games, "One World, One Dream." The other read, "Free Tibet." It turned out that the protesters performed similar actions at Mt. Everest and later on the Great Wall of China. Laurel Sutherland, Duane Martinez, and Hannah Strange firmly established themselves as champions of Tibet.

TIBETAN FREEDOM TORCH & RALLIES

Thousands of people gathered at United Nations Plaza on the morning of April 8 to witness the Tibetan Freedom Torch (TFT) ceremony and participate in a march to City Hall and to the Chinese consulate.

A press conference was held. Speakers included Vassallo, Tenzing Chonden, North American Representative of the Parliament-in-Exile, Charles Altekruze, a former Olympian, and representatives of SF Team Tibet.

The TFT ceremony began with Opening Blessings prayers and a Dedication and Moment of Silence, followed by a welcome speech by Ngodup Tsering. Chaksampa Tibetan Dance and Opera Company then gave a vigorous performance. The TFT was introduced and it was placed in front of a picture of the Dalai Lama. Supervisor Daly and Tenzing Chonden presented Good-Luck scarves to the Dalai's Lama's portrait.

Then Tenzin Dasang read a statement on the TFT and led the crowd in repeating an oath to continue the struggle for Tibetan freedom. This was followed by the Tibetan National Anthem. Next, a Tibetan monk released 50 white doves as a symbol of peace, one for each year Tibet has been under the Chinese occupation.

Supervisor Daly again spoke to the crowd and called on everyone to receive the torch with “alarm and protest.” Tenzing Chonden spoke again and was followed by Jamyang Norbu, a respected founder of TYC. The segment ended and thousands headed to SF City Hall.

At City Hall Tenzin Seldon, addressed the crowd through a bull horn. She was followed by Vassallo and then the President of the SF Board of Supervisors, Aaron Peskin. Jigme Norbu, nephew of the Dalai Lama spoke more about freedom and justice for Tibet. People then moved on to march toward the Chinese Consulate.

At the Consulate, the Tibetan National Anthem was sung and people sat down on the street to listen to the speakers. Namgyal Kyulu, President of the Tibetan Association of Southern California was followed by Lhadon Tethong, Executive Director of SFT and other speakers. SFT’s Tenzin Dorjee also spoke. The crowd rose to continue the march back to United Plaza and then there was another performance by Chaksampa and a tossing Tsampa (flour) in the air to propitiate the Buddhas, Gods and Goddesses, for “Peace on Earth and Victory to the Truth.”

The candlelight vigil began. Thousands braved the cold winds to stand and listen to Tibetan speakers, and later to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who called on President George Bush and other leaders to not go to the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics, for the sake of human rights. Actor Richard Gere, eventually flanked by Tibetan Buddhist monks echoed Desmond Tutu’s call. Thousands joined in prayers for the victims of Chinese government abuse in Tibet.

OLYMPIC FARCE

SF Team Tibet had gathered at Ferry Park and protesters were sent off in groups of 50 to be stationed along the published route. Hundreds of pro-torch demonstrators carrying extra large red Chinese national flags and were said to have been bused in by the Chinese consulate and other pro-China groups, though some said they had come of their own accord. Many protesters carried Tibetan flags and shouted slogans calling for Tibetan independence and for human rights for the country.

The rerouting of the torch from its published course has been well-publicized since April 9. Thousands of people, both the Chinese government supporters and pro-justice Tibet campaigners, Darfur and Burma activists, and others were denied the right to protest along the torch route as the Mayor had promised. The closing ceremony at Justin Herman Plaza was cancelled as thousands waited for it. After a brief opening ceremony, the torch was hidden for over 45 minutes and reappeared on Van Ness Avenue, far away from those gathered along the published torch route. Buffered by

dozens of security officials and police, the torch was carried north to Bay Street and later onto a street leading to the Golden Gate Bridge. But, it turned around and headed to San Francisco International Airport for a hasty closing ceremony, bypassing tens of thousands of people.

Around noon, about 300 Tibetan protesters and Supervisor Daly had pushed past a line of police in the middle of the Embarcadero near Folsom Street, part of the torch route. The group held a 40-foot sign that read, "San Francisco says: No Torch in Tibet." They stopped the 50 passenger bus carrying six Olympic torch bearers and Chinese officials near Embarcadero and Bryant Street. Topden Tsering, Barbara Green, Vassallo, and Tenzin Dasang were amongst the protesters in front of the bus. Video shows that after the bus stopped it continued approximately another 10 feet into the crowd. This disregard for the people led Tsering and Vassallo to keep some overly emotional folks from vandalizing the bus. Nine protesters lay down in front of the bus and blocked its passage. While supporters chanted slogans, the police later removed them. (See video at

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=4263514830983503897&q=bus+san+francisco&total=594&start=0&num=10&so=0&type=search&plindex=6&hl=en> and <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=2446307752428223316&q=bus+san+francisco+torch&total=13&start=0&num=10&so=0&type=search&plindex=8&hl=en>)

The Mayor and the Chief of Police would state to the press that the reroute was an eleventh hour decision after the bus, carrying torch bearers and Chinese officials, was stopped.

The almost total reroute was denounced by President Aaron Peskin of the SF Board of Supervisors. "Gavin Newsom runs San Francisco the way the premier of China runs his country - secrecy, lies, misinformation, lack of transparency and manipulating the populace," Peskin said. "He misled supporters and opponents of the run. People brought their families and their children, and (mayoral officials) hatched a cynical plan to please the Bush State Department and the Chinese government because of the incredible influence of money."

Some demonstrators caught up to rerouted torch. Television footage showed one Tibetan who was dragged back by police for trying to break through the police line around the torch. Many others still managed to show their banners and wear messages on their t-shirts in clear shot of the Olympic torch.

SF Team Tibet held a victory rally at Ferry Park, adjacent near the torch relay's cancelled closing ceremony. The people cheered after a speech by Majora Carter. Carter was an official Olympic torch bearer who pulled a Tibetan flag from her sleeve and waved it not long after officially receiving the torch. Her commitment to human rights struggle of the Tibetans was inspiring. The crowd was also presented with the bikers for Tibet who would carry the TFT down the coast of California. SFT's Golden Gate Bridge activists received the leader's and the people's thanks.

The thousands of people who demonstrated April 8 and 9 may have seen the giant billboard, displayed for weeks over one of the city's busiest freeway that called to "Stand up for Tibet." Tibetans and San Francisco will forever be remembered in Olympics' history as having vigorously protested and displayed tremendous alarm toward Beijing's fake symbol of peace.