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Olympics: Web sites unblocked but still no freedom of expression

"We welcome the news today that the authorities have lifted blocks on our website in the Olympics media venues and possibly elsewhere in Beijing," said Roseanne Rife, Deputy Director for The Asia-Pacific Program at Amnesty International.

"However, arbitrary blocking and unblocking of certain sites does not fulfil the duty to comply with international standards of freedom of information and expression."

Beijing-based journalists have told Amnesty International that the organization's website together with several others -- including those of Human Rights Watch, Radio Free Asia and the BBC Chinese language service -- have now been unblocked in the Olympics media venues. Some reports suggest that they are also accessible in other parts of Beijing, although availability appears to be inconsistent.

Other websites which cover human rights or political issues remain blocked. They include another website set up by Amnesty International to encourage debate about China's human rights record in the run-up to the Games www.thechinadebate.org

"Like the rest of the world, Chinese citizens have a right to access information and to express themselves on-line on all areas of legitimate public inquiry, including human rights. We continue to urge the authorities to ensure unfettered access to the Internet in line with official Olympic promises of 'complete media freedom' and international human rights standards," said Roseanne Rife.

The Chinese authorities have imprisoned several Chinese journalists for posting or accessing information on the web deemed politically sensitive. They include Shim Taos, who continues to serve a ten-year prison sentence for sending an email to an overseas website about official instructions to journalists on how to cover the 15th anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown in Beijing.

Amnesty International also noted that the Chinese authorities' decision to unblock some websites appeared to be prompted by the expression of strong public concern over the issue, including from the International Olympics Committee (IOC) who only days previously had allowed the Chinese authorities to maintain blocks on certain sites.

"Where silent diplomacy on human rights fails, strong public pressure can clearly have an effect," said Roseanne Rife. "We continue to urge the IOC and world leaders planning to attend the Games to speak out for human rights and on behalf of Chinese human rights activists who have effectively been silenced.

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