

INTERNATIONAL  
**Herald Tribune**

## Beijing's protest zones: Apply at your own risk

By Andrew Jacobs

Wednesday, August 13, 2008

**BEIJING:** After a decade struggling to expose government corruption in his village near the Russian border, Gao Chuancai was stunned two weeks ago when he heard the news on television: during the Olympics ordinary citizens would be free to air their grievances to the world in specially designated "protest zones" in the capital.

All they had to do was apply.

But four days after he evaded security officials in his hometown, slipped into Beijing at dawn and submitted his application, Gao, a farmer from Heilongjiang Province, has yet receive permission to display his hand-scrawled poster, which accuses local Communist Party officials and the police of conspiring to steal public money.

If the silence at the protest zones is any indication, Gao's prospects are not very good.

Five days since the Olympics began, not a single demonstration had taken place at the three city parks approved for protests. In fact, at least four people have been detained for seeking to demonstrate, according to human rights groups and relatives of those who have been seized.

The detainees include Ji Sizun, a self-trained lawyer from Fujian Province hoping to publicize China's lack of democracy, and Zhang Wei, a Beijing resident who was seeking to draw attention to what she contends was the illegal demolition of her home.

More than three days after their detention, both Ji and Zhang remained in police custody.

Other would-be protesters say they have been turned down or dissuaded by intimidation. Ge Yifei, a well-known property rights advocate from the city of Suzhou, said she was trying to fill out an application when officials from her hometown showed up to escort her back to the train station.

For human rights advocates, the refusal to approve any protests coupled with the seizure of applicants is troubling.

Nicholas Bequelin, a researcher with Human Rights Watch who is based in Hong Kong, said China's claim that it would allow protests during the Olympics was a ploy to quell critics seeking to highlight China's lack of free expression. Now that the Games have begun, he said, the government is betting that empty protest zones will draw less media attention than full ones.

"You cannot legally protest in China, and the empty protest zones are proof of that," Bequelin said.

Public security officials have refused to say how many applications have been processed and whether any had been approved. A spokesman for the office that handles protest requests said he had no knowledge of anyone being detained for asking to protest.

At a news conference on Wednesday, Qin Gang, a Foreign Ministry spokesman, insisted that protests would be allowed as long as they did not break the law or disrupt social order.

Zhang's family said the police took her from home the night of Aug. 6, a few days after she sought

permission to protest the destruction of the family's house for an Olympics-related project.

Her son, Mi Yu, said she had been charged with "disturbing social order," and a few days ago the authorities had said she would be held at a local detention center until Sept. 6. He said he had been denied permission to visit her.

"The government is afraid of possible bad influences on people who are here for the Olympics," he said.

Gao, the farmer from northeastern China, has no illusions about his chances of getting a protest permit. Over the years, he said, he has been jailed a dozen times and beaten repeatedly for trying to publicize what he calls a cabal of corrupt officials in Xing Yi, a village just outside Harbin, the provincial capital of Heilongjiang.

Twice he traveled to Beijing to present a formal complaint to the central government. On both occasions, he said, provincial officials awaiting him at the entrance of the petition office destroyed his documents and escorted him home.

He said his troubles began in 1995, when he and other villagers discovered a ledger book showing the embezzlement of \$22,000 designated as compensation for 32 villagers whose land had been taken for a water purification plant. When he made public accusations against the three officials, he was jailed for 15 days and warned to keep quiet.

A tall, plain-spoken man, Gao, 45, persisted. During a subsequent arrest, he said he was brutally beaten by the police. They broke his leg in two places, his teeth were shattered and, he says, they kicked his genitals so hard he became impotent. A few months later, he said, his wife filed for divorce.

During an interview on Tuesday, he showed photographs of his bruised limbs. His limp and evident stutter, he said, were a result of the beating.

"They have destroyed my life," said Gao. "I am not asking for much. I just want justice."

Last week, after he heard about the Olympic protest zones, Gao mailed in his application to Beijing. When he called to follow up, he was told to phone back in a few days. Gao detected a brush-off and decided to come to the capital.

To evade the local police, he sneaked out of town and took a circuitous route by bus and by train, a voyage that stretched nearly two days. Before arriving in Beijing, he was careful to fold up his handwritten protest poster and stash it inside a collapsible umbrella.

On Wednesday, after two days wandering the streets, he worked up the nerve to visit the office of public security management. "Whatever happens, happens. I don't care if I die," he said as the taxi pulled up to the building. At the reception area, a pair of officers questioned him about the nature of his protest and asked him to fill out a lengthy form that included the names and numbers of the officials who had wronged him.

Gao was reluctant, but he complied.

After an hour, they smiled and told him to return in five days for a response to his application. As he walked out the door, he overheard one of the officers on the phone. He was calling the police station in Harbin.

*Correction:*

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## Would-be protesters detained in China

By Andrew Jacobs

Tuesday, August 19, 2008

**BEIJING:** When Gao Chuancai slipped into the capital last week hoping to stage a one-man rally against corruption in his village in northeast China, he knew his chances of success were slim.

During his decade-long crusade, Gao, a 45-year-old farmer from Heilongjiang Province, had been jailed a dozen times. Two beatings by the police left him with broken bones and shattered his teeth, he said, but did little to temper his drive.

The government's recent announcement that preapproved protests would be allowed at three sites during the Olympic Games gave him a wisp of hope. Two weeks ago he mailed in his application, and last week he came to Beijing to follow up. During a visit to the Public Security Bureau on Wednesday, the police interviewed him for an hour and then told him to return in five days for his answer. "They'll probably arrest me when I go back," he said afterward.

Gao did not have to wait very long. A few hours later, he was picked up by the authorities and escorted back to Heilongjiang. On Monday, his son, Gao Jiaqing, in the family's village, Xingyi, said he had not heard from him.

A man who picked up the phone at the Wanggang police station, near Xingyi, acknowledged that Gao was being detained at a local hotel. "He's under our control now," said the officer, Wang Zhuang.

Gao's ill-fated odyssey is not unlike the journeys of other would-be demonstrators who responded to the government's notice that protest zones would be set up during the Games. At least three other applicants are in custody. Two, Ji Sizun and Tang Xuecheng, were seized during the interview process at the Public Security Bureau, according to human rights activists.

On Monday, 10 days into the Games, the government had yet to permit a single demonstration in any of the official protest zones. According to a report on Monday by Xinhua, the official news agency, 77 applications have been received since Aug. 1, from 149 people.

All but three applications, however, were withdrawn after the authorities satisfactorily addressed the petitioners' concerns, Xinhua said. Two of the remaining requests were rejected because the applicants failed to provide adequate information, and the last was rejected after the authorities determined it violated laws on demonstrations.

Protests are not illegal in China, but they require government approval, a prospect that often dissuades citizens, daunted by excessive bureaucracy or potential retaliation. Posters and slogans must be submitted to the police, and each participant must apply in person. Any rally deemed a threat to "social stability and public order" can be denied permission, and most are.

Nicholas Bequelin, a researcher at Human Rights Watch, a private group based in New York, said he and other rights advocates had been skeptical that China would fulfill its pledge to allow greater free speech during the Olympic Games. Still, he said, the International Olympic Committee should be held accountable for not pressing China on the issue. "The IOC seems oblivious to the fact that they're holding the Games in a repressive environment," he said.

Giselle Davies, spokeswoman for the IOC, said that she hoped Beijing would follow the path of other host cities and allow demonstrations in designated areas but that the issue was one for local officials

to decide.

The days Gao spent in Beijing were both nerve-racking and exhilarating for him. He said he knew that the police from Heilongjiang were on his trail, but he was buoyed by the possibility that a foreign reporter might tell his story. "With the Olympics here, now is the best time to remind the world that China still has problems that need to be solved," he said.

His handwritten poster listed a series of grievances against Xingyi and Wanggang officials. He accused them of stealing money meant to compensate farmers after their land was confiscated and described how he was jailed and beaten for publicizing his allegations. Last year, he wrote, his wife swallowed a fatal dose of pesticides at the Wanggang government building in the futile hope that she might shame officials into releasing the money owed to Gao and his neighbors. Gao said that his wife had been suffering from breast cancer and that the couple could no longer afford treatment.

The police arrested Gao, saying he had given her the poison. A court released him, but the police warned him against continuing his campaign. Gao said the police told him that if he caused trouble again, he could be killed.

He was not deterred. When he arrived in Beijing, he slept in a different hotel or bathhouse each night. By checking in around midnight and leaving at dawn, he said he hoped to evade security officials who often trace people through their registration information. He made sure to leave his cellphone at home and called his son only from public phones.

In a telephone interview, Gao's son said he was worried about his father, but he also expressed resignation.

"I used to try to stop him but now I don't bother," said the son. "He has been through so much but he keeps on chasing his dream of justice." He sighed, then added, "I fully support him."

*Correction:*

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