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## Beijing Report

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# China to set up Olympic protest zones

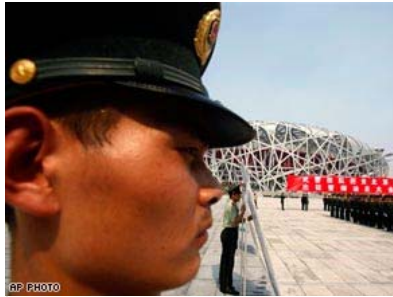
### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Beijing to set up designated zones for protesters at Olympics
- Protests are likely to be in outlying parks
- Move seen as a softening stance in China's policy towards protests

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**BEIJING, China (AP)** -- Beijing will set up specially designated zones for protesters during next month's Olympics, a security official said Wednesday, in a sign China's authoritarian government may allow some demonstrations during the games.



GP PHOTO

China is ramping up security ahead of the Beijing Games.

Worries about terrorist attacks, both from international groups and Muslim separatists from western China, and about protests of any kind have prompted one of China's broadest security clampdowns in years. The overall effect is that while Beijing looks cheerful, with colorful Olympic banners and new signs, the city feels tense.

Vehicle checkpoints ring Beijing. Visa rules have been tightened to keep out foreign activists. Police have swept Beijing neighborhoods to remove Chinese who have come to the capital to complain about local government misdeeds, and known political critics and underground Christians have been told to leave.

But Liu Shaowu, director for security for the Beijing Olympic organizing committee, said Wednesday

that areas in at least three public parks near outlying sporting venues have been set aside for use by demonstrators.

The remarks were the first public confirmation that Beijing may tolerate a modest amount of protest at an Olympics that the government hoped would be flawless, boosting its popularity at home and China's image abroad.

"This will allow people to protest without disrupting the Olympics," said Ni Jianping, director of the Shanghai Institute of American Studies, who lobbied Chinese leaders to set up the protest zones.

It was not clear how easy access would be to enter the zones. Liu and Beijing police would not say if special permission would be needed. A human rights campaigner criticized the move as cosmetic, and Beijing has already refused visa requests for known foreign activists.

A Beijinger whose restaurant was demolished in the city's Olympic makeover and who was jailed for trying to organize a protest, Ye Guoqiang, was taken from the Chaobai Prison on Tuesday to an unknown location, four days before he was due to be released, the monitoring group Chinese Human Rights Defenders said Wednesday. Police in Ye's old neighborhood said they were not aware of the case.

Liu, the security official, said police were trying to strike a balance between the need for safety and the desire for festiveness.

"We truly do want to preserve the festive and joyful atmosphere of the Olympic Venues," Liu told a news conference. "At the same time we want to reduce the impact security has on daily life."

He said threats from terrorism were real, given the international climate, and that the hundreds of thousands of visitors expected in Beijing presented a ripe opportunity for infiltration.

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In approving the protest zones, Liu said officials noted that Athens set up such areas for the 2004 games. The Salt Lake City Winter Games of 2002 did too. "We have already designated specific areas where people or protesters who want to express their personal opinions can go to do so," Liu said.

Protests have become commonplace in many parts of China in recent years, especially by state industry workers upset about layoffs and farmers angry about land confiscation. But China's leadership remains wary about demonstrations in the capital or large-scale protests anywhere, fearing they could snowball into widespread anti-government movements. Three violent protests have occurred in far-flung provinces in recent weeks.

In a sign of Chinese nervousness, the special protest areas are not near the Olympic green where most

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southwest, 3 miles from the softball venue; the Purple Bamboo Park in the west, south of the volleyball arena; and Chaoyang Park in the east where beach volleyball will be played.

Liu also reiterated that Chinese regulations require that all protesters apply and receive permission in advance, though he sidestepped questions about whether that included the special zones. Ni, the Shanghai scholar, said that Chinese protesters may be allowed only in the rather far World Park, not in the other venues.

"Designating unilaterally 'protest zones' for demonstrators does not equate to respecting the right to demonstrate because in this situation control comes first and the right second," said Nicholas Bequelin, a researcher with New York-based Human Rights Watch's Asia Division.

Still, supporters of the zones said the move was a step forward. Susan Brownell, an American academic at Beijing Sports University who wrote a proposal that Ni forwarded to government officials, said her research found that the zones would help deflect criticism from all but the more extreme rights groups -- an argument she thought the government bought.

"It was about placating the West. They were really concerned about social order," Brownell said. "They must have come up with a plan to improve social order rather than make it worse."

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