

Belgian athletes barred from raising issues in Beijing

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BRUSSELS, Belgium, January 23: Belgian athletes will be prohibited from raising human rights or other political issues at Olympic venues during the Beijing Games. Outside the sports venues and Olympic village, however, they will be free to speak their mind.

The Belgian Olympic Committee said Wednesday it would issue a strict code of conduct for athletes competing in Beijing.

"Not a single participant in the games will be allowed to give a political opinion at the Olympic venues (e.g.: competition sites and the Olympic village)," the committee said in a statement.

The committee also ruled that Olympic athletes would be barred from wearing any distinctive insignia protesting China's human rights record.

However, the committee said athletes would be free to talk about "issues that are personally relevant" outside the Olympic venues and during the six-month run-up to the games.

As the games draw near, the issue of human rights in China is increasingly prominent in the European media and several Olympic committees are pondering how to address the issue.

Last week, the Dutch government said China's human rights record must improve and that the Beijing Olympics should be used as an opportunity to press for change. China has already come out against raising political issues during the games.

In Europe, several activists have called for a boycott of the games to protest China's human rights record. Protests usually center on the treatment of the spiritual movement Falun Gong, which is banned in China, and activists defending the cause of an independent Tibet.

The Belgian committee said it was "utterly convinced that the games would have a positive influence on the social development of a country like China."

