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Bunker mentality as Beijing readies for Games



Its ancient city walls were demolished decades ago, but with the Olympic Games fast approaching Beijing is raising a new defence that is echoing those long-gone fortifications.

The capital has gone into fortress mode for next month's Games, with police checkpoints choking road traffic into Beijing, tightened security across the city, and even surface-to-air missiles set up near Olympic venues.

About 150,000 police and other security personnel will be on hand to safeguard the Games, state media reports said, surpassing the 100,000 at the 2004 Athens Games, the first held in the post-9/11 era.

The police and soldiers making up the main security force will be aided by another 400,000 civilian volunteers whose duties will include

watching for any threats to the Games.

"We will help watch during the Olympics for any 'sudden incidents' or suspicious activity and report it to police immediately," volunteer Zhang Dekui told AFP, gesturing toward his hip-holstered cell phone.

"It is the responsibility of all Chinese to contribute to a successful Olympics," said the 51-year-old convenience store owner, standing near the main Olympic soccer venue in a blue and white "Beijing 2008" shirt and hat.

The wide-ranging security saw the implementation of a so-called "Defence Line" security plan launched last week that included hundreds of checkpoints manned by armed police on routes into the capital.

State media said the plan was aimed at preventing any suspicious persons or cargo from entering Beijing ahead of and during the August 8-24 Olympic Games and was causing traffic delays of more than two hours into the city.

Despite huge signs around the city pronouncing "Beijing Welcomes You!", China also has tightened visa restrictions, causing disruptions for business travellers and forcing many foreigners to leave.

On Monday, immigration police went door-to-door in Beijing's diplomatic residence district checking the passports of foreigners.

China says the blanket security is to thwart possible terrorist attacks, while as-yet unexplained explosions on two buses Monday in the southwestern city of Kunming that killed two people have added to the tensions.

But some critics say the clampdown's real aim is to prevent domestic political and social discontent surfacing while the world watches, accusing the government of carrying out a wave of arrests of rights activists and dissidents.

"It is partly to prevent terrorism but even more of the public security power is being used to silence political dissent and keep domestic discontent away from the Games," Beijing-based dissident writer Liu Xiaobo told AFP.

"We have never seen such security here before."

The government has repeatedly pointed to what it calls a threat from militants in its restive Muslim western region of Xinjiang, a claim backed by some anti-terror experts.

"Beijing faces a higher threat than Athens. Absolutely," said Rohan Gunaratna, head of the Singapore-based International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research.

China faces a threat from the East Turkestan Islamic Movement a shadowy group believed to seek Xinjiang independence and now operating in Pakistan's border regions, he said.

China has announced breaking up a number of Xinjiang-based plots this year but has revealed little evidence, adding to skepticism over the threat.

However, even frequent critics of China's government concede that with dozens of foreign leaders to attend the Games, including US President Bush, stifling security is unavoidable.

"Whether it's in the spirit of the Olympics or not, with a big international event and so many state leaders attending, that entails pretty thorough security," said Nicholas Bequelin, a Hong Kong-based researcher for Human Rights Watch.

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