

Activists call for protests against Israel at Paris Olympics

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Paris, July 25 (RHC)-- As the Paris Olympics are about to open, calls persist for Israel's expulsion from the world's biggest sporting event. From rights groups to athletes, demands are growing for a boycott of Israel over the atrocities taking place in the Gaza Strip, which have led to the death of more than 39,000 Palestinians since October 7th last year.

The Palestine Olympic Committee sent a letter earlier this week to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) chief, Thomas Bach, asking him to ban Israel.

Meanwhile, petitions and social campaigns have gained momentum. A petition launched by the U.S.-based rights group Avaaz garnered over 600,000 signatures, demanding the IOC ban Israel “until their government ceases its assault on innocent civilians in Gaza.”

In addition, anti-war activists have mobilized, actively demonstrating in Paris and at the IOC headquarters in the Swiss city of Lausanne.

But with the Games to commence Friday and no ban on Israel yet in sight, experts urge continued activism against Israel’s participation and expressions of solidarity with Gaza throughout the event.

Rebecca O’Keeffe, a peace activist and member of Irish Sport for Palestine, has been strongly advocating against Israel and believes it should be banned from the Olympics and Paralympics. “For decades, apartheid Israel has targeted, abused, injured, and murdered Palestinian athletes and coaches, and this has only intensified during the ongoing genocide.

“Israel has also converted Palestinian sports venues into mass detention centers and continues to play in illegal settlements,” O’Keeffe, a former international basketball player, told Anadolu. She criticized the IOC for remaining silent, and said that though it claims political neutrality and will not permit political demonstrations, the reality of its stance exposes “blatant double standards and selective morality.”

O’Keeffe said previous action taken by the IOC, including a ban on Apartheid South Africa and on Russia, sets a precedent and gives clear justification to remove Israel from the Games. “When you consider Israel’s violations of the Olympic Charter, as well as both rulings from the International Court of Justice of plausible genocide and illegal occupation, it should be a clear-cut case in my opinion,” she said.

O’Keeffe said she thinks Israel wants to use the Olympics as an opportunity to “sports-wash the genocide” in Palestinian territories through “overt displays of propaganda, promotion of Zionist nationalism, and inclusion of athletes who have served — or still serve — in the Israeli Occupation Forces.”

In a similar tone, Palestinian political analyst Kamel Hawwash questions why Israel has not been banned from the Games while its forces have been killing Palestinians, many of whom might have participated in the Olympics

“I believe that based on its record, it should be banned from the Olympics and any attempt to say, ‘no it shouldn’t be banned,’ is outrageous and demonstrates a lack of sympathy with the Palestinian people,” Hawwash told Anadolu in a video interview.

He said athletes from other countries that have been banned, pointing to Russia and Belarus, are competing as neutrals. “If Russia is banned, Israel should be banned too, and that would be equality. It wouldn’t be picking on Israel, but it will be punishing it for its crimes,” said Hawwash.

Experts are of the view that during the tournament, the street protests will intensify. Jules Boykoff, an American author and academic whose research areas include the Olympics, believes that the demonstrations could intensify after the Games begin.

“Activists in France are promising to deliver rambunctious street protests during the Olympic period to raise the issue of Palestinian justice,” he told Anadolu.

Boykoff highlighted how both the IOC and FIFA, the world governing body for football, have gone out of their way to avoid the question of Gaza’s destruction by the Israel Defense Forces, adding that their behavior has been both “hypocritical and shameful” and violates the spirit of their charter documents.

“The IOC, based on its actions, appears impervious to the pleas of activists but street protests could force the question at press conferences,” he said.

Experts also highlight how participating countries and athletes can exercise pressure on Israel and the IOC. Activist O'Keeffe said that within the IOC, there is a certain set of guidelines outlining athletes' freedom of expression, recommending familiarization of rights and working within that to apply pressure wherever possible. "Athletes and countries can also appeal to their politicians to advocate and mobilize on their behalf, and national sporting bodies can release a statement to the IOC," she said.

Supporters and spectators can follow the BDS movement, sign petitions, email the organizations demanding action, join protests, and boycott commercial sponsors, she added.

On the other hand, analyst Hawwash believes that countries should boycott the Olympics, adding that several countries did this when the Games were held in Russia years ago and that athletes participated in their own capacity

"So, it wouldn't be a new thing to do to say that countries will boycott the Olympics if Israel participates." "If many countries decided to do that, the International Olympics Committee would have to consider banning Israeli athletes from participation."

O'Keeffe argues that the IOC should remove Israel from the Olympics and Paralympics, adding that if organizations act decisively, countries and athletes would not be put in such positions.

On athletes participating against Israeli competitors, Hawwash said this was a matter of principle. "I think they should withdraw from facing Israeli athletes, Israeli teams, like the football team," he said, adding that countries should not put their athletes in such a difficult position and that they themselves should decide they cannot participate in a sporting event since the opponent country is committing war crimes and genocide.

For many athletes, opting out of the Games would be a moral stand that would be on the right side of history, said Hawwash.

On the issue of possible sanctions and bans as faced in the past by athletes who refused to compete against Israeli athletes, the political analyst said: "If they are sanctioned by the International Olympics Committee, then that would mean the International Olympics Committee is double punishing the Palestinians: One, by allowing Israel to participate and then punishing those who stand against Israel's crimes and who will withdraw from competitions with Israelis."

Boykoff maintained that many athletes will feel compelled to speak out. "Refusing to play against Israeli athletes would raise the issue into the global news cycle, but any athlete who does that risks a backlash from both the IOC and those living under the spell of Israeli impunity."

Solidarity with Palestinians

Experts also spoke on how participants could express solidarity with the Palestinians. Boykoff said that once the Palestinian flag is raised at the opening of the Olympic Games, "I have no doubt there would be the most audible voice of encouragement and celebration of the Palestinian team that is there."

That would be the most visible way of showing support, with the whole stadium "on its feet," said Hawwash.

Other means of expressing support he suggests include displays of the Palestinian flag or keffiyeh by medal winners, along with their own flag. "These are all visible ways of supporting the Palestinians," he said.

"Countries that support Palestine could invite the Palestinian team to their countries to show their solidarity after the games are finished and that would send the best response to Israel that it is not the victim."

“It is the Palestinians who are, but that these Palestinians are walking proud and tall, lifting their flag and competing to win,” he said.

Boykoff noted that the Olympics represent the pinnacle of most athletes’ careers, adding that Palestinian athletes would have the support of justice-seekers around the world. If they feel a bit more wind beneath their wings, that may be why, he added.

For her part, O’Keeffe believes that within the guidelines of freedom of expression, athletes could use any opportunity to mention Palestine during interviews, press conferences, or social media. Understanding the key messages of Palestinian solidarity would also help in this regard.

“Supporters can wave flags, wear various Palestinian symbols, and attend protests that will be taking place in civil society.

“Above all else though, recognize the achievements of these Palestinian athletes, especially in a world that has denied them any semblance of fairness, dignity, or level playing field – all values that are supposed to be promoted by the Olympic Charter.”

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