

Remarks of Ellen Freudenheim, Research Director

Dream for Darfur

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I'm Ellen Freudenheim, Research Director for Dream for Darfur, and I've had the pleasure of studying the Olympic Truce over the past few months. I'd like to refer you to the longer report on Dream for Darfur's website that goes into more detail than we can here.

The Olympic Truce has the potential to be a commanding idea that can save lives. Or, it can be just another vague symbolic concept, a nicety. Our mission here today is to harness the implicit power of this idea to the crisis of Darfur, to demand that the international community utilize it as a catalyst for peace.

The Ancient Truce

Just as we live in a world plagued by conflict, so did the ancient Greeks. In the 8th or 9th century, to ensure that athletes and spectators could safely journey to the Olympics, one of four important religious festivals and dedicated to the god Zeus, they instituted a time-limited ceasefire, called *ekecheiria*. This means holding of hands, or truce of god, or cessation of military hostilities.

The truce became part of the Olympic Games, scholars tell us –and it was even mentioned by Thucydides, who described one occasion when it was violated. The ancient Olympic Games were held once every four years – unlike our every-two-year cycle today. Their Truce tradition lasted for perhaps 1,200 years, every four years, making it the longest truce known to history.

Two ideas emerge from the Olympic Truce. One is the notion of “safe passage” – that people, especially athletes, should be able to get to the Games and home again safely. The second is a more global concept of peace during the Games.

The Olympics were no longer observed for millennia after the Romans converted to Christianity. But in the 1890's, a Frenchman, Pierre de Coubertin, latched onto the idea of reviving the Olympic Games, creating what we know today as the International Olympic Committee, the IOC.

As far as we – in our brief research – could discern, the Olympic Truce had no more reality in the first half of the 20th century than, say, Athena rising from the half shell.

Rebirth of Olympic Truce

That is, until 1956, when the Olympic Games were to be held in Melbourne. It was the time of the Hungarian uprising, brutally repressed by the Russians. *The New York Times* reports that the IOC called for the Olympic Truce, in a classic instance of safe passage for athletes.

The truce idea pops up again in the 1990s, when the IOC was under the leadership of Juan Antonio Samaranch. He invoked it several times in 1992. In 1993, he, together with the UN, created a UN resolution in support of the Olympic Truce, a resolution that's become as much of

a tradition as the Games themselves. Samaranch called for the Truce again in late 1993 as the violence in Bosnia got darker. In 1995, the host of the forthcoming Olympic Games, the United States, introduced that resolution at the UN again. And in 1998, in a new twist, the IOC and the government of Japan, which was about to host the Games in Nagano, called for it just as the US was threatening to bomb Iraq for weapons inspections violations. Japan did not want this warfare going on during the Olympics. And the US, in fact, did not bomb.

In contrast, the current IOC administration has used it solely as an educational tool. There's an Olympic Truce statue. Educational retreats to talk about peace. And a children's book. All lovely things, but none that will save a life in Darfur. Still, the purported goals of the Olympic Truce certainly favor interpretation as a real tool for peace and diplomacy.

The IOC Falls Short of Own Goals for Truce

The IOC has lofty goals – but it has only used the Truce for PR, and at best education.

Its website states, “Taking into account the global political reality in which sport and the Olympic Games exist, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) decided to revive the ancient concept of the Olympic Truce with the view to protecting, as far as possible, the interests of the athletes and sport in general, and to contribute to searching for peaceful and diplomatic solutions to the conflicts around the world.”

Through this global and symbolic concept, the IOC aims to:

1. Raise awareness and encourage political leaders to act in favor of peace;
2. Mobilize youth for the promotion of the Olympic ideals;
3. Establish contacts between communities in conflict;
4. Offer humanitarian support in countries at war;
5. Create a window of opportunities for dialogue, reconciliation and the resolution of conflicts.

Clearly, these goals are consistent with an Olympic Truce for Darfur.

Application to Darfur

Those committed to the status quo will say that this Olympic Truce is historical, that it is just symbolic. But the Olympic Truce was invoked to try to stop the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. The government of Japan invoked it to forestall the bombing by the US government of Iraq in 1998. It is an idea in evolution, a tool waiting to be used.

And what we learned is that these experiences in Bosnia and Iraq, where the war did ensue, is this: the Olympic Truce will, alone, not make peace. It is a call to action, a catalyst to focus powerful forces, such as the UN Security Council, on a problem. It is not a full solution to the crisis of Darfur – but it is an opportunity for mobilization.