

2008 HOUSING RIGHTS AWARDS

2008 HOUSING RIGHTS VIOLATOR AWARD WINNER:

The International Olympic Committee

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is an international organisation, based in Lausanne, Switzerland, with responsibility for promoting the ideals of the Olympic movement, overseeing implementation of the Olympic Games and, in particular, selecting host cities for the summer and winter Games from among the bidding cities.

The severe impact of so-called “mega-events” such as the Olympic Games on the housing rights of predominantly poor city dwellers has been well documented. COHRE’s 2007 report, *‘Fair Play for Housing Rights: Mega-Events, Olympic Games and Housing Rights’* noted housing rights violations in several host cities, including Seoul (720,000 evictions), Atlanta (approx. 30,000 displaced), Athens (hundreds of Roma residents evicted) and Barcelona. But it is without doubt in Beijing in 2008 that Olympics-related housing rights violations reached a terrible peak – COHRE’s research shows that approximately 1.5 million evictions were carried out as a direct result of Beijing’s Olympics bid, including in the period 2000-2001 during which China was bidding to host the 2008 Games.

As a prominent international organisation, the IOC has a clear responsibility both to respect human rights in its own activities and to promote respect for human rights by others, particularly host cities and states and Organising Committees of the Olympic Games. For example, it is well within the IOC’s powers and means to take concrete steps to ensure that cities bidding to host the Olympic Games do not engage in housing rights violations, both during the bidding process and – for the successful bidding cities – during preparations for staging of the Games. Indeed, given the IOC’s key role in selecting host cities in a hotly contested and very public competition, it would appear to have a unique opportunity to promote respect for all human rights, including housing rights.

Sadly, the IOC has in practice failed to live up to its human rights obligations. Though engaging with COHRE and other civil society organisations on these issues, the IOC has consistently demonstrated it is unwilling to examine and change its practices and culture, which have “turned a blind eye” to rights violations and allowed violating host cities to continue their practices with seeming impunity. In a recent response to COHRE’s letter raising concerns of housing rights violations in the Beijing Games, for example, the IOC maintained that most of the cases of rights violations brought before it were not Games related, a view echoing a similar declaration by the Beijing Organising Committee.

The IOC has therefore been chosen by COHRE as a recipient of a 2008 Housing Rights Violator Award for its ongoing failure to take steps to ensure that cities bidding to host the Games do not engage in housing rights violations, both during the bidding process and during preparations for the Games. It is to be hoped that the IOC will, in response to this Award, engage in good faith with civil society and human rights organisations and work with them to ensure that, as a prominent and respected international body, it does in future fulfill its human rights obligations in all areas of its activities.