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The Olympics Around the World: Japan

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Many China-centered English-language websites (China Beat included) tend to focus their coverage on China and the US (or, rather, coverage of Chinese media and then coverage of China as it is discussed and written about in the US and perhaps the UK as well). In recognition that the Olympic Games are a global event, we thought this would be a unique opportunity to gauge how China was being covered all over the world. To that end, we sent out requests to China Beat contributors from around the world (or contributors who regularly follow the media in other parts of the world) to send in reports about how the Beijing Games were being covered in their home countries. We’ll post these reports as we get them. Here is the first—from James Farrer, who lives in Japan.

By James Farrer

While the English language press has been reporting that over 100,000 police and 30,000 soldiers have been readied to protect China’s Olympic city, Japan’s Asahi Shimbun has come up with figures a full order of magnitude higher. The August 4, 2008, morning Asahi Shimbun (Tokyo edition) ran a front page feature article reporting that despite claims by the Chinese government that no one has been made to leave the city, nearly 1.4 million migrant workers have been moved out of the city for the Olympics. In turn, the report says, nearly 1.2 million police and 200,000 army personnel have moved into the city, comprising an astonishing 10 percent of the total urban population. The article cites an unnamed public security source as claiming, “In the central city nearly 1 in 5 people are security personnel, a so-called ‘human sea strategy’ for protecting the capital city.”

Despite the large numbers, the security personnel are told to avoid standing about the most touristic spots of the city. Fears of terrorism, particularly by Uighur radicals, are cited as one reason for the massive mobilization of security personnel. Chinese security have also reportedly contacted Japanese officials were about the possibility that East Turkistan Islamic Movement terrorist sleepers based in Japan could take advantage of Japanese tourists’ visa free access to China in order to slip into the country to disrupt the Olympics. As an illustration of the deportations of migrant workers, the article featured the story of a Mr. Ge who worked as a house painter and cleaner supporting his wife and two children who were also living and studying in Beijing. He was forced to return to Sichuan although their house there had been destroyed in the earthquake, and he would have no place to return to.

On Aug. 5, the focus of coverage was the deadly attacks on police in Kashgar. A smaller article on page two points out that members of the Japanese Olympic team are expressing concern about their personal safety during the games. One Japanese participant in the shooting events is quoted as saying, “This didn’t happen in Beijing, but it is scary.” The word “scary” made it into the article headlines, and it now seems that fears about security are added onto negative coverage about pollution and political repression. In this story, the same 1.2 million figure for police and 200,000 number of military personnel were repeated, pointing out that both had been brought in from across the entire country. The article quoted a Chinese source who said that such huge concentrations of security personnel in the capital had left security thin in other regions of the country.

As one Japanese media observer said to me, it is doubtful if such negative coverage would be happening if the games were in Europe.

James Farrer is associate professor of sociology at Sophia University in Tokyo and the author of Opening Up: Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform in Shanghai.

Tags: The 2008 Beijing Olympics