

China calls Spielberg's resignation from Olympic role 'unfair'

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Steven Spielberg speaks during a news conference in 2006 announcing his role as artistic advisor for the Beijing 2008 Olympics. Photograph: China Daily/Reuters

Steven Spielberg's resignation as artistic adviser to the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing in protest at China's complicity in humanitarian crisis in Darfur was welcomed by human rights groups today, but dismissed by China as "unfair".

The Oscar-winning director, who had been working since last year to help choreograph the games' opening ceremony, had previously warned Beijing that he would withdraw unless it did more to distance itself from the violence.

In a statement released last night, the director said: "I find that my conscience will not allow me to continue business as usual. At this point, my time and energy must be spent not on Olympic ceremonies but on doing all I can to help bring an end to the unspeakable crimes against humanity that continue to be committed in Darfur."

Hollywood stars have been at the forefront of an international campaign linking China to violence in the Darfur region of Sudan, saying that money and weapons from Beijing have helped fuel a conflict which has claimed 200,000 lives and forced 2.5 million people from their homes.

But the Chinese embassy in Washington said attempts to connect Darfur with the Beijing games goes against the Olympic spirit. "As the Darfur issue is neither an internal issue of China, nor is it caused by China, it is completely unreasonable, irresponsible and unfair for certain organisations and individuals to link the two as one," it said in a statement.

However, campaigners and rebel groups in Darfur praised Spielberg's move. "This will send a message to other countries, other individuals and athletes, who haven't taken a strong stance on Darfur up to now," a spokesman for the Sudanese opposition Justice and Equality Movement told Reuters.

"We are calling on all countries to boycott the Olympics, athletes as well", he added. The New York-based Human Rights Watch called on corporate sponsors to pull out.

Mike Blakemore, from Amnesty International UK, said it was right for people doing business with China to examine whether their actions made them "complicit" in human rights violations.

He told BBC Radio 4's The World at One he was not calling for a boycott of the Beijing games but said they provided a "fantastic opportunity" to focus attention on China's human rights record.

The culture secretary, Andy Burnham, told the BBC: "The power of the Olympic Games is that it does bring people together and it does allow issues of global concern - Darfur is certainly one of those - to be addressed.

"Our position is always one of constructive engagement, working to improve the situation in the country and raise issues around the world and that's what we will, as the government, continue to do."

Spielberg, who directed the Holocaust drama *Schindler's List* and founded an educational foundation dedicated to teaching young people about the genocidal crimes of the Nazis, has also come under criticism from Darfur activists who have accused him of double standards for working so closely with a partner of the Sudanese government.

Last year the actor Mia Farrow wrote an editorial for the *Wall Street Journal* saying the director risked becoming a modern-day Leni Riefenstahl - the German film director who became one of the Nazis' chief propagandists.

Today Farrow welcomed Spielberg's move and said she hoped others involved in the games would pull out. "This is the time to increase pressure on China," she said.

In April, Spielberg wrote a letter to the Chinese president, Hu Jintao, calling on China to take firm action to stop the violence in Sudan, but received no response to his request for a meeting.

The director has donated about \$1m (£500,000) to aid groups working in Darfur to protect the mainly non-Arab civilian population, which has been targeted by pro-government Arab militias.

In yesterday's statement, Spielberg said Sudan's government bore most responsibility for "these ongoing crimes" and said China "should be doing more to end the continuing human suffering there".

China, which buys two-thirds of Sudan's oil, has blocked punitive moves by the UN security council and, according to Amnesty International, has sold tens of millions of pounds worth of weapons.

Earlier yesterday, nine Nobel Peace Prize laureates - including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Elie Wiesel and Jody Williams - wrote to Hu urging China to uphold Olympic ideals by pressing Sudan to stop atrocities in Darfur.