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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

U.S. Puts 2 Gay Athletes on Official Delegation to Sochi

By Andrew McChesney

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Tennis star Billie Jean King has called on athletes to protest Russia's "gay propaganda" law.

U.S. President Barack Obama has decided to skip the Sochi Winter Olympics and instead send two prominent gay Americans as members of the official U.S. delegation, drawing praise from gay rights supporters.

In a rebuff to the Kremlin on its treatment of gays, the White House unveiled on Tuesday a delegation that includes the two openly gay athletes, tennis champion Billie Jean King and Caitlin Cahow, an Olympic silver medalist and bronze medalist in women's ice hockey.

Noticeably absent from the list are Obama, Vice President Joe Biden and their spouses. This will be the first time since 2000 that a U.S. president, first lady, vice president or former president will not attend the Olympics.

U.S.-based Human Rights First said that the decision to exclude Obama and Biden sends a "powerful" message to the Russian government that the Obama administration opposes Russia's "gay propaganda" law, which entered force in June and has been blamed by rights groups for an outbreak in violence and other hostilities toward Russian gays.

"The selection of this delegation displays to the international community the American values of respect and equality for all," Human Rights First's Shawn Gaylord said in an e-mailed statement.

The White House made no comment about the Russian law when it presented the official delegation, but spokesman Shin Inouye said the group "represents the diversity that is the United States" and that Obama "knows they will showcase to the world the best of America diversity, determination and teamwork," The Associated Press reported.

> Honored to represent USA in Sochi and I hope these Olympics will be a watershed moment for the universal acceptance of all people.
>
> — Billie Jean King (@BillieJeanKing) December 18, 2013

It was unclear whether King or Cahow might use the Sochi Games as a platform to protest the Russian law. But King, who turned 70 last month and is the winner of 12 Grand Slam singles titles, has indicated that she might.

"Sometimes I think we need a John Carlos moment," she told USA Today on Sept. 25, referring to the U.S. track champion who with American sprinter Tommie Smith was ejected from the 1968 Mexico City Olympics for protesting racial discrimination.

"I think there's watershed moments, benchmarks. I would hope the majority of the athletes would speak out. It's a great platform," she said of the Sochi Games.

On Wednesday, King said on Twitter that she was "honored to represent [the] USA in Sochi."

"I hope these Olympics will be a watershed moment for the universal acceptance of all people," she said.

Cahow suggested that President Vladimir Putin had no reason to be offended by Obama's absence from the games or his choice of delegates.

"It's obviously a statement that's being made, but I think it's an incredibly respectful one," she said, according to USA Today.

Russian officials made no immediate public comment about the development. Biden led the U.S. delegation to the Vancouver Winter Olympics in 2010, while first lady Michelle Obama played the same role at the Summer Games in London in 2012.

Obama's selection of King drew praise from USA Today sports columnist Christine Brennan, who called it "a stroke of genius."

"What better way to show the nation's disgust for President Vladimir Putin's anti-gay propaganda law than for Obama to send an American cultural icon and sports legend who also happens to be openly gay?" she wrote in a column.

Also on the U.S. delegation will be Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, who is a former U.S. ambassador to Russia, and the current ambassador, Michael McFaul. Both diplomats are vocal gay rights supporters.

The delegates will attend the opening and closing ceremonies of the Winter Games, watch sporting events and meet with U.S. athletes, the White House said in a statement.

Obama will not be alone in skipping the Sochi Games. France and Germany also have decided not to send their presidents, while the leaders of several other countries have flip-flopped on their plans. Latvian President Andris Berzins initially said he would not go but later relented at the request of his country's Olympic committee. He said in a radio interview Tuesday that "sports and human values" rather than the fear of a political scandal with Moscow had prompted him to change his mind, Interfax reported.

The Winter Olympics opens in Sochi on Feb. 7 and closes on Feb. 23.

Also see:

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