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Things Should Quiet Down for Olympics After Korean Students Attempt a March

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SEOUL, South Korea—Radical students and the South Korean government are squaring off for what may be their last major showdown in the streets before an expected lull in political activity during the September Olympics.

On Monday the government is expected to quash an attempt by students to meet with their North Korean counterparts at the Demilitarized Zone that separates the two Koreas. Familiar scenes of firebomb-throwing students confronting riot police are likely to appear on foreign television screens, possibly increasing the unease of Olympic athletes and tourists.

But major domestic violence isn't likely to continue as the Sept. 17 opening date of the Games approaches, say Western and Asian diplomats and Korean political analysts. Radical student leaders have already announced they don't intend to create unrest during the Games. And as public opinion against continued protests gets stronger with the Games approaching, the students may have difficulty reigniting their movement, political observers say.

Less Support

Even among other students, the activists don't have the widespread support they had last summer when tens of thousands of Koreans took to the streets to bring down the government of Chun Doo Hwan. "If the atmosphere was ripe, as it was in June '87, I wouldn't hesitate to join the demonstrations. But some of the students are hasty in their drive for reunification" of North and South Korea, says law student Ahn Sang Hoon.

Many Koreans are determined to present the world with a successful and peaceful Seoul Olympics and aren't likely to support student demonstrations. "Popular reception of our efforts at reunification has been lukewarm because of concern for the Olympics," concedes Kim Joong Ki, representative of the 20-student delegation that hopes to meet with the North Koreans.

But Mr. Kim said he expects the demonstrations to escalate before the Olympics. The radical students don't share the government view of the Olympics as a national priority. "It would be a crime for the Olympics to take place in the South alone, because it would show Korea as a divided nation," says Lee Sung Chul, a student at Korea University.

A June 10 attempt by students to march to the border village of Panmunjom for a meeting with North Korean students was thwarted by tens of thousands of riot police. The crackdown was generally tolerated and to some extent supported by newspaper editorials and the public, which views the students' demands for immediate reunification as naive and dangerous.

Students Arrested

In recent days, the police have picked up more than 1,000 students protesting the government prohibition of their march; five of the 20 delegates to the meeting have been arrested, Mr. Kim says.

The students have succeeded in pushing the government toward a dialogue with the North since June. Though the students were prevented from reaching Panmunjom in June, the government seems to be

adopting some of their demands in an effort to co-opt their support.

In a major policy speech July 7, President Roh Tae Woo said the South would cease to view the North as an enemy and would pursue trade and cultural exchanges. He also said his government wouldn't oppose the establishment of relations between its allies and North Korea.

More recently, the South responded positively to a proposal from the North for a preliminary meeting to establish contact between members of parliament from both sides. A preliminary meeting of legislators is expected in Panmunjom Aug. 19.