FINAL Testimony of Joey Cheek

It is my sincere privilege to address this august committee. I would like to thank the Chairman, Congressman Tierney, all of the members and the congressional staff for extending the invitation to speak on my experiences as an Olympic athlete and a concerned citizen who continues to fight for the protection of the millions of innocent civilians residing in Darfur, Sudan.

I would like to thank the committee for calling this hearing and for drawing attention to the crisis in Darfur as well as exploring options that we Olympians have for positively motivating the international community to swiftly and effectively improve the lives of the millions that are suffering.

Throughout my life I have been incredibly blessed. After years of hard work, training, exhaustive preparations, and the sacrifice of my family, friends, and community, I have had the privilege to compete in two Olympic Games representing the United States as Speedskater. From those two competitions I brought home three medals, a bronze medal in the 2002 Olympic Games and gold and silver medals in the 2006 Olympic Games in Turin, Italy.

Winning Olympic medals is a great personal thrill, but I brought home lessons and experiences from those two games that I participated in that are worth much more than mere athletic awards. These lessons are best illustrated by a story that I feel encapsulates the true spirit of Olympic competition and goes strait to the heart of the crisis in Darfur that we are addressing here today.

Within the Olympic Village, an area only a handful of people throughout the world are ever permitted to see, the greatest athletes on Earth live and complete their final preparations for the most important competition of their lives. Success means immortality in the annuls of Olympic history and falling short of the goal of athletic perfection means that although your name may not be mentioned alongside the greats, you are still part of a rarefied club, the holder of a shared experience of excellence. The media loves to tout this aspect of the games: the thrill of victory, that agony of defeat.
However seeing only the competitive part alone shows a tiny fraction of the true beauty of the Olympic Games.

I believe that the true Olympic Spirit can be demonstrated by this example: Inside the Village all of the athletes eat together. I know that may seem trivial, but as you walk inside the dining hall your gaze drifts up to the rafters where all of the flags of the competing nations hang then drifts back down to the long tables where all of the athletes proudly wear the colors of their nations draped on their backs the true glory of this otherwise ordinary act is played out.
Athletes from the Americas sit and break bread next to athletes from Africa. The athletes from the many nations of Europe, whose grandfathers lives were devastated by a war that encompassed the world, now laugh and embrace each other like brothers inside this shared space. It was in this enclave that I realized that I may have more in common with an athlete born in communist China, through our shared love of our sport and experience on the field of play, than I have with some of my own native born countrymen. This is the true magnificence of the

Olympic Games. We can fight like hell on the athletic field and return to live in peace.

It was with this spirit in mind that I made a decision that has altered the course of my life. After winning a gold and silver medal in the 2006 Olympic Games I donated all of the money I received as a medal bonus, $40,000, to an organization to aid refugees from the region of Darfur. I have been asked many times why I choose that conflict at that time and my answer is simple. I believed that no where else on earth was there a crisis affecting so many people that had such an inverse level of international attention and power focused on bringing it to an end. Although the level of attention focused on this conflict has improved over the last sixteen months or so since I made this announcement, there are still thousands of people being killed or raped and millions more who have been driven from their homes.

I have spent the last year as an unofficial ambassador of sorts, traveling the country educating young people on the crisis and what they can do to help end it, and traveling the world speaking with leaders in other countries imploring them to do more. Just a few months ago I traveled to Chad, where I visited refugee camps populated by tens of thousands of Darfuri citizens and heard firsthand of the tales of systemic murder, rape, villages being razed to the ground, and families being forced to flee for their lives. The images from those camps continue to haunt me. I am filled with rage when I think of the level of depravity to which some people can sink. Complacency in the face of such evil is indeed very hard to justify. It is, in fact, the opposite of what the Olympics were created to celebrate, which is why this topic is so relevant here today.

As the glow of games in Turin fade the light of a new games begins to shine. China, the most populated nation on earth will be hosting the grandest sporting event on earth, the 2008 summer Olympics. China, with its economy growing faster than almost any other nation, looks at these games as their coronation on the worlds stage, proving that they are indeed a force that will shape history in this century. By hosting an Olympic Games, a nation becomes the torch bearer for the Olympic ideals, as well as the host of a sporting event. In this crisis China plays an especially important role because it is the top economic partner of Sudan. China purchases two thirds of Sudan's oil exports, China has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in Sudan's economy and China sits on the UN Security council wielding veto power over any international effort to protect innocents in darfur from these murderous elements. By hosting an event that professes peace over conflict, China has laid claim to a higher moral ground. It is now up to them to fulfill that obligation.

China is not alone however, as the sole bearer of the Olympic ideal that all citizens are entitled to the rights of a safe and protected life. Every nation completing in these games has an obligation to fight the injustice of mass atrocities. That is why I have formed a new organization, an international coalition of athletes, titled "Where Will We Be?". I seek over the next year to bring in athletes not just from the United States, but every country in the world competing in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing to stand up and say that we believe that the Olympic games should be more than just a sporting competition. We believe that no matter what nation in which you were born you deserve

the same chance to fulfill their dreams as the great athletes competing at the Olympics. We believe that China, as host nation and a nation with extraordinary leverage, should take a leadership role in ending the atrocities for the people of Darfur.
And we believe, that as athletes, we are leaders and role models in our community, and we will do all that we can to make all people aware of this crisis and that it can be stopped.

Thank you again to all the members of this committee and thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak about what makes my Olympic experience truly meaningful. Thank your for hosting a hearing on this critical issue, which could ultimately mean the difference of life and death for millions of people. I know that the eyes of the world will be on Beijing on 8-8-08, but I implore all of us to wonder where the citizens of Darfur will be at that time. Thank You.