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Filmmakers Barred From Chinese Festival

By Edward Wong

BEIJING — When the American filmmakers [Jon Alpert](#) and [Matthew O’Neill](#) traveled around Sichuan Province last year to document the anger of parents whose children had died in school collapses during the earthquake in May, they ran into a chilly reception from officials. Police officers harassed the two men and their co-workers, detained them and interrogated them for eight hours, they said.

Now, the Chinese government has denied both of them visas, blocking them from presenting their documentary, “[China’s Unnatural Disaster: The Tears of Sichuan Province](#),” at the Beijing Independent Film Festival this week. The two men, who made the film for HBO with the co-producer Peter Kwong, said their visa applications were rejected late last week.

“We are extremely disappointed that the Chinese government denied our request for visas and that we will not be permitted to discuss this film with a Chinese audience in Beijing,” Mr. Alpert and Mr. O’Neill said in a joint e-mail message. “The denial of our visas fits in with a pattern of what seems to be a complete commitment on the part of this Chinese government to crush any inquiry into the possibility of wrongful deaths during the earthquake in Sichuan.”

Chen Cong, a vice consul in the press office of the Chinese Consulate in New York, declined to explain the rejection, saying that diplomatic organizations had “the right not to give a reason for why the visa was denied.”

Mr. Alpert and Mr. O’Neill have both won Emmy Awards and have worked together on highly praised documentaries, including “[Baghdad ER](#).” The Sichuan documentary was shown on HBO in May, one year after the earthquake, and got positive reviews. The [official Web site of the film](#) is blocked in China.

The Chinese government has gone to great lengths to silence any mention of the collapsed schools and, according to an official count, the 5,335 children who died or remain missing. In the weeks after the earthquake, which left nearly 87,000 people dead or missing, parents took to the streets to demand official investigations into why so many school buildings had collapsed even though other buildings around them remained standing. The parents said shoddy construction and corruption were the obvious causes.

Local officials ordered security forces to detain the parents or tried to buy the silence of the parents with compensation money. Meanwhile, journalists who tried approaching the schools

were stopped, and two rights advocates who pressed for official inquiries were detained. The two advocates, [Huang Qi and Tan Zuoren](#), were put on trial last month.

Artists trying to raise consciousness over the collapsed schools have been similarly harassed. The Chinese filmmaker Pan Jianlin was tracked by security officials after his documentary on the deaths, “[Who Killed Our Children?](#)” was shown last year at the [Pusan International Film Festival](#) in South Korea. Ai Weiwei, a prominent artist who often criticizes the Communist Party, had his Web site blocked after he tried to compile online a comprehensive tally of dead schoolchildren. He was [temporarily detained](#) in Sichuan last month when he tried to attend the trial of Mr. Tan.

A person helping to organize the film festival in Beijing said the HBO documentary would be shown on Thursday even though the filmmakers would not be able to attend. The festival is showcasing more than 80 films, and each one is generally shown once.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/02/world/asia/02quake.html?scp=1&sq=Filmmakers%20barred%20from%20Chinese%20festival&st=cse>