

Written by  
Saturday, 21 July 2012 19:37 -

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The torch is on the way to the Olympic heartland in London's East End in time for the opening of the world's biggest sporting event next week, July 27. To assure the games' smooth going, an army of security people from the police, military and civilian sectors is providing support, including weaponry, fast jets and missiles. Outside the perimeter of the Olympic Park, the metropolitan police are combing a wider area for suspicious activity or for persons of interest. On the way to the

Tower

Bridge

this Sunday (July 15), an Italian tourist and I were asked by plainclothes police, or so they claim they are, basic questions about our identities and destinations. It was perhaps a random incident in the frenzied preparation for the London Olympics.

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## **PREROGATIVE**

### **A Non-Olympic Experience in London**

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**By ROMEO P. MARQUEZ**

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LONDON – As the biggest sporting event in the history of the United Kingdom in 64 years, the Olympic Games is unparalleled in scope and immensity.

Budget allocations are in the billions of pounds. The security net is widespread, covered no less by thousands of police, elite military forces and civilian security guards.

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Backstopping the huge manpower is the deployment of military hardware - heavy machine guns, fast jets and anti-aircraft missile systems sited at six strategic locations to repel attacks by air on the Olympic Park in the east end of this city.

British authorities are prepared for any eventuality. The memories of 40 years ago reverberate every staging of the Olympics when Palestinian terrorists raided the Olympic village in Munich, took 11 Israeli athletes and coaches hostage and killed them.

"The innocence of sport," writes Gerald Seymour, Independent Television News reporter turned novelist, had died with the terrorist attack in 1972.

"I was on the Puerto Rican team's balcony and had a clear view of him (Andre Spitzer, Israeli fencing coach) at a window . . . A rifle barrel was against his head x x x It was past noon. He was dragged away. I never saw him alive again," Seymour recounts in a centrepiece article for the London Evening Standard.

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As the opening day of the games on July 27 approaches, authorities are proactively out in the field, combing every corner of the city, on the lookout for any indication of terrorist or terror-related activity.

I had planned to photograph the Olympic symbol now adorning the popular Tower Bridge, which is about three miles from where I was staying in the general area of Chelsea

On Sunday (July 15), I took off after taking lunch at a small Filipino restaurant near Buckingham Palace. Instead of taking public transport, I decided to walk the distance, eager to know the neighbourhood and the landmarks associated with royalty.

I had packed my backpack with two four-battery sets for my camera, a map, a guidebook, an umbrella, a fleece, extra shirt, two hard-boiled eggs, an apple, two bananas and two 710 ml of bottled water. I had also brought my

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press credentials and two back issues of *Balita*, the Toronto-based newspaper I write for as columnist.

Halfway through this journey, I sensed that I was veering away from the walking route provided by Google map mainly because I missed a slight turn to the left. Now, I was walking inland instead of staying on The Queen's Walk, the pathway that follows the south bank of River Thames.

I looked at the big map near the Waterloo Station. Before I could find the red notation "you are here" in the map, a bearded Italian guy came and asked if I could help him find his way in his tourist map.

I told him to consult the big map posted on the bus stop shelter and if he could not find his destination within the 15-minute-walk radius, it means he's way far. But at least, I assured him, we're both on the southwest end of where Parliament is.

It was at this juncture that two men in civilian clothes broke up our conversation. In a split second, they flashed their badge and identification.

"Police," the two intoned. "What are you doing here?" one of the men inquired.

"I'm trying to help this guy," I answered, pointing to the Italian. "He said he's lost and I'm trying to locate his place in the map".

"Can I see your ID?" he demanded. I refused, and held my ground on his second attempt.

Wary of scammers, I asked him instead to show me his badge and ID again. I said I'd like to take a picture of them. Inside my mind, the thought said that I'm not going to fall victim to this kind of people.

He must have sensed my firm reluctance to show any identification. It was

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alright to answer his questions but to identify myself to a stranger was quite absurd.

The other guy was quietly watching. Then he changed his line of questioning.

"Are you together?" he asked, meaning if I knew the Italian guy and were wandering in the city together.

"No, no. I was just asking for his help," replied the Italian. "I lost my way".

Just as quickly, I told the officer, "Look, he came to me and asked for directions. I am also lost".

"Okay, okay," said the officer.

"You (pointing to me), where are you going?"

"I'm walking to London Bridge and Tower Bridge," I responded.

"Alright, you're on the wrong side of the street," he explained. "Do you see that red sign on the lamppost straight ahead? Go there and turn right," he said.

I did. And followed his direction.

Walking through The Queen's Walk again on the way to the famed bridges, the brief incident keeps popping in my head.



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What triggered the plainclothes policemen - assuming they're real police - to approach the Italian guy and I? Was it his beard or my long ponytail? Was it the Italian guy's look or the color of my skin?

It seem the authorities will not leave anything to chance. The stakes in holding the Olympics are so high for London and the sporting world. # # #

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