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NBA will not gag players competing at Beijing Games

By Steve Keating

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BOSTON (Reuters) - The NBA will make no attempt to gag members of the U.S. men's basketball team competing at the Beijing Olympics, even as the league attempts to woo the Chinese market, NBA commissioner David Stern said on Sunday.

In recent interviews, LeBron James and Kobe Bryant, who are expected to anchor U.S. gold medal efforts in August, have added their voices to those urging China to use its influence on Sudan to help end the suffering in Darfur.

Bryant, James and several other NBA players have been working with the group Aid Still Required.

The group said on its Web site (www.aidstillrequired.org), that it had recently released a public service announcement by Bryant on ESPN and Fox Sports Net.

"I am here not as a personal person but as the commissioner of the NBA, and my view is that people like our players are free to speak out and have their views," Stern told a news conference ahead of Game Two of the NBA finals.

"They've been encouraged to have those views by the USOC (United States Olympic Committee) and the IOC (International Olympic Committee) and I think that's where it should properly be."

While some of the NBA's best known players press China on human rights issues the league said it would throw its weight behind aid efforts for the victims of the recent earthquakes that rocked the country.