

China has agreed to talk to Dalai Lama, says Brown

CLIFFORD COONAN China Correspondent, 20th of March 2008

CHINA: AS CHINA battled to contain further damage to its international reputation following last week's riots in Tibet, British prime minister Gordon Brown said premier Wen Jiabao had told him he was prepared to hold discussions on Tibet with the Dalai Lama.

China accuses the Dalai Lama, who fled Tibet in 1959 after a failed uprising against Chinese rule, of inciting last week's violence, the worst protests in Tibet for 20 years. The exiled spiritual leader denies he orchestrated the demonstrations and says he favours a peaceful resolution to the issue of greater autonomy for the remote Himalayan enclave.

Mr Brown, who insisted he would meet the Dalai Lama when he visits Britain in May - a move guaranteed to raise Chinese hackles - said he had spoken to Mr Wen on the telephone yesterday.

"The premier told me that, subject to two things that the Dalai Lama has already said - that he does not support the total independence of Tibet, and that he renounces violence - that he would be prepared to enter into dialogue with the Dalai Lama," Mr Brown said.

China believes it is engaged in a "life and death" battle with the Dalai Lama. Security forces in Lhasa and other Tibetan areas are arresting rioters and tightening control in Tibet after last week's protests.

The standard Chinese line on talks with the Dalai Lama is that Beijing is prepared to open dialogue if he can prove he is not seeking independence for Tibet. Mr Wen made the same point during a news conference on Tuesday.

However, the Chinese invariably follow up these remarks with comments saying the Dalai Lama is a dangerous separatist that cannot be trusted, and who says one thing but does another.

A classic example of this rhetoric came from the Communist Party chief in Tibet, Zhang Qingli.

"The Dalai is a wolf in monk's robes, a devil with a human face but the heart of a beast," Mr Zhang told a meeting of the Tibetan administration, according to the *Tibet Daily*.

Briefing the House of Commons about the phone call, Mr Brown said he had urged a measured response on Tibet.

"I also called for constraint, and I called for an end to the violence by dialogue between the different parties," he said.

The official Xinhua news agency took a different line in its report of the phone call, saying the two leaders pledged to boost bilateral ties and that Mr Brown would be coming to the Beijing Olympics and he believed the games would be a success.

"During the phone conversation, Wen also briefed Brown about the recent riot in China's Tibet and reiterated the stance of the Chinese government on the issue. For his part, Brown said that Britain also opposes violent criminal acts," was how Xinhua reported the conversation.

"The most important thing at the moment is to bring an end to the violence, reconciliation, and to see legitimate talks taking place between those people and China," said Mr Brown.

Beijing said the situation in Lhasa was stable and plans to run the Olympic torch through Tibet would go ahead as planned, despite calls from rights groups for Tibet to be taken off the route and for world leaders to boycott the opening ceremony of the games on August 8th.

"The situation in Tibet has essentially stabilised, the Olympic torch relay will proceed as scheduled," Jiang Xiaoyu, executive vice-president of the Beijing Organising Committee for the Olympic Games, told a news conference.

The Olympic torch will pass through 19 cities in China on its route around the world next month and activists for many causes, including those seeking independence for Tibet and Xinjiang, press freedom activists and human rights advocates are gearing up to use the platform to lobby for their causes.

The Chinese government suspects that a terror plot in the restive province of Xinjiang, which led to a flight to Beijing from regional capital Urumqi cutting short its journey, was a failed attack by separatists based abroad. It blamed the militant Muslim Uighurs in the East Turkestan independence movement for the incident.

"We have concluded from investigations that the attempt to cause an air disaster on the Southern Airlines flight on March 7th was a grave act of sabotage instigated and carried out by Eastern Turkestan separatists from abroad," Xinjiang's Communist Party chief Wang Lequan said.

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