

Sixth round of Sino-Tibetan dialogue on the way

A Tibetan delegation led by the Dalai Lama's Special Envoys, Lodi Gyari and Kelsang Gyaltzen, is leaving India on 29 June 2007 for a sixth round of the Sino-Tibetan dialogue. The delegation will meet representatives of the Chinese authorities in Shanghai on 30 June and return to India on 5 July 2007. According to sources, the delegation, which was originally scheduled to go on 26 June, had to be postponed due to last minute disagreements. A proposal by the Dalai Lama to go for a pilgrimage in China is expected to be a central topic of the discussions.

This round of dialogue has raised particular expectations beforehand as it may well be the last one before the Olympic Games are held in Beijing in the summer of 2008. Many observers are convinced that it was the perspective of the Olympic Games which moved the Chinese authorities into resurrecting the dialogue in September 2002 in the first place. Opinions diverge though as to what Beijing's motivation is, and exactly what goals it is pursuing.

The last round in February 2006 took place while thousands of Tibetans were burning wildlife furs following the Dalai Lama's advice to ban the use of wildlife products, and thus testifying en masse their loyalty to their spiritual leader in a manner unseen since the late 1980s. The Tibetan delegation had a day-long meeting with the Executive Vice Minister of the Communist Party of China's United Front Work Department, Zhu Weiqun. On their return, they reported that "*substantive issues*" had been dealt with. But they also noted that, as with the previous four rounds, major differences still exist, even in the approach to addressing the Tibet issue. Still, both sides expressed the sentiment that they remain committed to the dialogue process. At the same time, the Chinese authorities strengthened their anti-Dalai Lama campaign in Tibet.

In his annual 10 March statement in 2006, the Dalai Lama requested that Tibetans and their international supporters "*work toward the creation of a conducive environment for negotiations*". In the following April, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in exile appealed to Tibetans and Tibet Support Groups to refrain from any activities, including demonstrations, that would cause embarrassment to President Hu Jintao during his visit to the US, which coincided with a visit by the Dalai Lama. The appeal met with a mixed response.

Since late 2006, Lodi Gyari has given several public briefings about the status of the dialogue process, arguing that he no longer felt bound to the agreed consensus on confidentiality, as the Chinese side had repeatedly provided selected details of the process. At a briefing given at the Brookings Institution, Washington DC, on 14 November 2006, he qualified the view among "*some detractors in the Chinese Government*" that the death of the Dalai Lama would put an end to the Tibetan issue, as a "*most dangerous and myopic approach*".

Meanwhile, on 18 May 2007, the Chinese authorities gathered 600 Party members holding leadership positions within the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in Lhasa to exhort them to mobilise, and "*launch a thoroughgoing struggle against splittism*" which TAR Party chief Zhang Qingli qualified as "*still intense and complicated*", since "*the international hostile force's political plot (...) to effect a breakthrough for Tibet's westernisation and separation from our country has remained the same all along*", and this aim is "*to cause disorder in Tibet, (...) [and] change the colour of Tibet, its political position and China's territory*". Apparently referring to the virtual impossibility of quelling the ongoing influence of the Dalai Lama on Tibetans within Tibet, Zhang spoke of the "*Dalai clique stepping up 'infiltrations' in the TAR*", and said: "*Due to specific historical and environmental factors*", religious influences are deep-rooted and "*cannot be abolished in one day*". In a remark effectively acknowledging the discontent of most Tibetans with their current situation, he admitted that with the opening up of the region and the development of a market economy generating changes of ideology and social mentality, there are "*lots of unstable elements*".

Most recently, in May 2007, The Chinese authorities showed their ongoing refusal to accept unchecked religious activities by ordering the demolition of a giant religious statue at Samye monastery, which was just in its final construction phase, because it had not been officially sanctioned. Lodi Gyari condemned the "*divisive and sacrilegious act*" for causing "*deep anguish*" among Tibetans, and argued that, because the construction had united Tibetan Buddhist and Chinese Buddhist patrons, it was "*nothing less than an act of splittism*".

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