



DALAI LAMA AWARD ANGERS CHINA, STRAINS U.S.-SINO RELATIONS

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In a move that has upset China, the United States has awarded the Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled spiritual leader, the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal.

The Dalai Lama is in Washington, D.C., Oct. 17 to receive the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest award given to civilians.

The Buddhist leader, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, met with President Bush privately a day earlier, but the White House did not make photographs of the event available to the press in an attempt to appease China.

The Chinese government opposes any positive attention for the Dalai Lama because they view him as a dangerous political leader agitating for Tibetan independence from China.

The White House tried to make clear that the invitation was not an attempt to provoke China.

"We in no way want to stir the pot and make China feel that we are poking a stick in their eye for a country we have a lot of relationships with on a variety of issues," White House press secretary Dana Perino said.

Although this is his 12th visit to the White House and his fourth encounter with President Bush, Wednesday's award ceremony marks the first time that a U.S. president has appeared in public with the Tibetan leader.

The world is waiting "to see how China's concepts of harmonious society and peaceful rights" unfold, the Dalai Lama said after becoming the 146th recipient of the Congressional award.

"America cannot look to the plight of the religiously oppressed and close their eyes or turn away," said Mr. Bush, who sat next to the Tibetan monk during the ceremony and personally handed the medal to him.

The Dalai Lama's popularity

The Dalai Lama has become immensely popular in recent years, publishing a steady stream of books, including the best-selling "The Art of Happiness" and filling football stadiums during his U.S. appearances.

His message of peace and tolerance, combined with personal charisma and spirituality has made him popular with musicians, artists and Hollywood celebrities.

With his red and yellow robes, shaved head and twinkling eyes, his picture has become an icon similar to that of Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara or scientist Albert Einstein –popping up on everything from t-shirts to notebooks to boxer shorts.

China's fears

An editorial in the government-run China Daily newspaper explained China's position: "Using religion as a guise, the Dalai Lama has been engaged in secessionist activities for many years in his vicious attempt to split Tibet from the motherland and instigate political unrest in the autonomous region."

Chinese officials fear independence for Tibet would inspire other parts of China to call for independence too.

After unsuccessfully asking the U.S. government to cancel the award ceremony and meeting with President Bush, Chinese foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, warned it would damage relations.

On Tuesday, China pulled out of an international strategy session on Iran in protest of the award.

The Tibet question

Tibet is located in the Himalayas in Central Asia.

Control of the region has been disputed since China's People's Liberation Army invaded in 1950. A peace agreement was reached in 1951 granting China rule of the area.

Between the 17th century and 1959, Tibet was led by different men believed to be the Dalai Lama, a series of reincarnated leaders with the soul of a bodhisattva, or enlightened being.

The current and 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, fled into exile in 1959 to India with other government officials after a Tibetan uprising was crushed by the Chinese. He now leads what is called the Tibetan Government in Exile from Dharamsala, India.

The Tibetan Government in Exile considers the region to be autonomous and considers the Chinese to be illegitimate military occupiers.

Tibetan officials who work for the Dalai Lama in exile believe his controversial visit to the United States is a positive step for the Tibetan cause.

"I have no doubt this will give tremendous encouragement and hope to the Tibetan people," the Dalai Lama's special envoy Lodi Gyari told reporters.

-- *Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

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