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Dalai Lama's Visit Creates Dilemma For President Vicente Fox's Administration

by LADB Staff

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The visit of the Dalai Lama to Mexico in early October left President Vicente Fox in the tough position of wanting to extend an official welcome to the religious leader while taking care not to damage the country's growing economic partnership with China. The Tibetan religious leader visited Mexico at the invitation of Casa Tibet, Instituto Loseling, and the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) to participate in a series of educational and academic activities in Mexico state and Mexico City.

Prior to his trip to Mexico, the Dalai Lama stopped in Florida, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Fox declined to meet personally with the Dalai Lama to avoid the appearance that the Buddhist leader was being treated as a visiting head of state. The Dalai Lama, whose name is Tenzin Gyatso, said he was not offended that Fox had chosen not to meet with him. "I do not want to create an embarrassing situation for the governments of Mexico and China," he said.

The Dalai Lama was instead greeted by first lady Marta Sahagun and by Armando Salinas, deputy interior secretary for migration, population, and religious affairs. He also held separate meetings with two politicians with presidential ambitions, Mexico state Gov. Arturo Montiel Rojas and Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, and with a contingent of congressional leaders.

Fox's decision not to meet with the Dalai Lama set a stark contrast to the only other visit by the Tibetan religious leader to Mexico in 1989. On that occasion, the Dalai Lama had an audience with then President Carlos Salinas de Gortari when he traveled to Mexico to help inaugurate Casa Tibet and to participate in a conference sponsored by Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana (UAM).

Chinese government criticizes visit

In the days preceding the Dalai Lama's latest visit to the Americas, the Chinese government issued statements criticizing the Tibetan spiritual leader. "He is not simply an ordinary religious figure, he is an exiled person who is carrying out separatist activities to divide the nation," Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan said at a press briefing in late September. Those comments were followed a few days later by a statement from China's Ambassador to Mexico Ren Jingyu, who urged Mexico not to allow the Dalai Lama "to spread his revolutionary messages" on its soil.

The embassy followed that statement with a press release saying that the visit of the Dalai Lama to Mexico "does not promote good bilateral relations between the Mexican and Chinese governments. Despite the protests, the Chinese ambassador said that the Dalai Lama's visit was unlikely to directly affect long-term relations between China and Mexico. "He was invited by nongovernmental organizations," said the ambassador.

The Dalai Lama, who has lived in exile in India since a Tibetan uprising against the Chinese government failed in 1959, denied that he is seeking Tibetan independence from China. He went so far as to acknowledge that Tibet is now a part of China, but said the Chinese government must grant the region greater autonomy and religious freedom.

"I am not calling for independence, nor am I calling for separation," the Dalai Lama said during a news conference in Mexico City. "But we are demanding the recognition of certain rights." During a meeting with leaders of the Chamber of Deputies at the San Lazaro congressional building, the Dalai Lama mentioned the concerns raised by the Chinese government about his visit to Mexico. "I regret that the Chinese government was bothered by this visit," he said.

The exiled leader's outspoken criticism of China has, however, brought him disdain from Chinese authorities. He has especially hammered the Chinese government about allegations that authorities are dumping nuclear waste in Tibet and overexploiting the region's timber, oil, and water resources.

The Dalai Lama admitted he had no hard data to support the allegation that the Chinese government is dumping nuclear materials in Tibet, but he said the presence of deformities in several species of animals "increased the probability" that such a practice was taking place in remote areas of the region. "Logically, if we use common sense, China is so densely populated that the only suitable area where this nuclear waste could go is Tibet," the Dalai Lama told reporters.

The Dalai Lama, who led an interfaith service for peace at the National Cathedral in Mexico City, said his followers were willing to sit down with Chinese authorities to attain a peaceful solution to their conflict. He said face-to-face negotiations with Chinese leaders were "essential," given the skeptical nature of China's government.

Mexico repairs economic ties with China

The Dalai Lama's visit to Mexico came as the Fox government was in the process of repairing economic relations with Beijing. In an unprecedented move, the Chinese and Mexican governments agreed to create a binational commission to combat the widespread smuggling of Chinese clothing, footwear, toys, electronics, and other items into Mexico. The smuggled goods frequently enter the informal economy but have also been found in established retail stores. Smugglers have even been bold enough to bring counterfeit handicrafts and furniture from China and sell them as Mexican-made items (see SourceMex, 2003-09-17).

The decision to create the binational commission follows up on China's commitment earlier this year to combat smuggling (see SourceMex, 2004-01-04). "We reached an agreement with Chinese authorities to strengthen the flow of our commercial exchanges," said Economy Secretary Fernando Canales Clariond, who was in Beijing during a ceremony marking the creation of the commission. Also present at the event was Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez, who noted that the commission provided Mexico with a way to address the smuggling issue directly with Chinese authorities. "The commission offers us an unprecedented channel of communication that signals the strategic association between Mexico and China," said Derbez.

Mexico's willingness to increase economic cooperation with China is a stark contrast to the rocky relationship between the two countries just a few years ago. As recently as 2002, the Fox government was accusing the Chinese government of offering unfair incentives to Japanese, South Korean, and European companies to move their maquiladora operations from Mexico to China (see SourceMex, 2002-07-17 and 2002-12-13). The administration levied these charges following the loss of more than 500 maquiladora plants in recent years (see SourceMex, 2003-09-17).

The Mexican government also presented stiff conditions before endorsing China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), which contributed to increased tensions between the two countries (see SourceMex, 2001-06-13 and 2002-11-13). The Fox government's recent willingness to improve commercial relations with China may be in part the result of a recovery in the maquiladora sector. Mexican government statistics show that maquiladora plants have expanded their work forces significantly this year, adding more than 80,000 jobs between January and July.

The increase followed three consecutive years of job losses in the maquiladora sector. The Mexican government has helped the maquiladora industry by reducing duties on imported Asian components, ending the uncertainty that threatened to drive away many electronics companies.

A handful of observers also attribute the recovery in the maquiladora sector in part to increased technology in Mexico. "Efficiency in Mexico is higher than in China," said Saul Garcia, president of the Mexican division of Kyocera International, which assembles cell phones for the US company Verizon. "If you assemble this telephone automatically, then the cost of labor stops being important."

Some maquiladora-industry executives, however, say the Fox government was wrong all along in making China the principal scapegoat for the downturn in the maquiladora sector. Hector Fierro, an executive for a maquiladora operation in Ciudad Juarez, said the lack of comprehensive tax, labor, and energy reforms also contributed significantly to the industry's recent problems. "Neither China nor any other country has robbed Mexico [of anything]," Fierro said. "Mexico has lost things, but no one has taken them from us. Plain and simple, we've lost them ourselves."

Conversely, some textile-industry executives remain highly suspicious of China's commitment to combat smuggling. Rosendo Valles Costas, president of the Camara Nacional de la Industria del Vestido (CANAIVES), and Antonio Kuri Alan, head of the Camara Nacional de la Industria Textil (CANITEX), said China only documents about 8% of its exports to Mexico, meaning that a large share is imported via third countries. The two officials, who accompanied Derbez and Canales to Beijing in August, called on China to develop a system similar to one used by the US in which customs information is presented in a "clear and precise" manner.

Mexico sees opportunities in agriculture, tourism

The Fox government also views the easing of tensions with China as an opportunity to expand commercial relations in other areas such as tourism, industry, and agriculture. Agriculture Secretary Javier Usabiaga sees a potentially strong consumer market in China for Mexican products. "Our meat, fruit, and vegetable products provide us with a great opportunity," said Usabiaga. Mexico

also sees opportunities to crack a potentially lucrative Chinese seafood market. In early October, Cooperativas Pesqueras Mexicanas sent its first-ever shipment of Mexican lobsters to China.

The cooperative anticipates its lobster sales to China will amount to about 500 metric tons between now and February 2005, providing about US\$1 million in revenues for the fishing industry in Baja California state. The Mexican tourism industry is also making inroads in China. Tourism Secretary Rodolfo Elizondo, who was part of the Fox Cabinet delegation that traveled to Beijing in August, said China had agreed to make Mexico the 54th tourist destination approved by its government, a distinction that should make it easier for Chinese citizens to obtain visas to travel to Mexico.

Several Mexican companies are also considering investing in China. Mexican food company Grupo Industrial Maseca (GRUMA) earlier this year announced plans to construct a tortilla plant in Shanghai, China, sometime during 2005 (see SourceMex, 2004-06-23). The latest company to consider establishing operations in China is Imsatec, a subsidiary of Grupo Industrias Monterrey. Imsatec is looking into eventually constructing a plant to produce and sell fiberglass and other products in China.

For now, said Imsatec President Benjamin Clariond Reyes, the company would enter the Chinese market by negotiating a licensing agreement with a local company to sell its products in China. If sales are successful, then Imsatec will proceed with the construction of a plant to manufacture its products in China. (Sources: El Financiero, 06/30/04; The New York Times, 08/26/04; The San Diego Union-Tribune, 09/21/04; Los Angeles Times, 07/15/04, 10/03/04; Spanish news service EFE, 08/16/04, 09/21/04, 09/29/04, 10/03/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 10/04/04; Notimex, 08/09/04, 09/21/04, 09/29/04, 10/03/04, 10/05/04, 10/06/04; Unomasuno, 08/18/04, 10/04/04, 10/05/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 08/18/04, 09/22/04, 10/04/04, 10/05/04; La Jornada, 08/18/04, 09/29/04, 09/30/04, 10/04/04, 10/05/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 10/03/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 10/04/04; Unomasuno, 08/18/04, 09/22/04, 09/28-30/04, 10/04-06/04; Notimex, 09/21/04, 09/29/04, 10/03/04, 10/05/04, 10/06/04; El Universal, 09/22/04, 09/29/04, 09/30/04, 10/01/04, 10/04-06/04; Associated Press, 10/01/04, 10/03/04, 10/06/04)

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