

Dalai Lama expenses furor brews

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The Ministry of the Interior (MOI) yesterday denied allegations by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the media that its request for details of any government money spent on the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan by local governments was politically motivated.

"As the government authority in charge of religious affairs, we received a request from the Control Yuan to see if government money was spent by the seven local governments that invited the Dalai Lama to cover his expenses," Civil Affairs Department Director Huang Li-hsin (黃立憲) told the Taipei Times by telephone yesterday. "The Control Yuan made the request because they received a public petition asking if government money was spent to cover the expenses of the Dalai Lama's visit and whether this was in violation of the separation of religion and state clause in the Constitution."

Last month, Yunlin, Chiayi, Tainan County, Kaohsiung and Pingtung counties and Tainan and Kaohsiung cities jointly issued an invitation to the Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, asking him to visit Taiwan to hold religious services for those who lost their lives and to comfort the victims of Typhoon Morakot.

Upon receiving the request from the Control Yuan, the MOI sent inquiries to the local governments on Tuesday, a move that riled DPP lawmakers — such as Tainan City's William Lai (賴清德) and Kaohsiung City's Kuan Bi-ling (關文良) — who questioned whether it was a retaliatory measure because China had voiced opposition to the visit.

Huang denied the allegation and said both the Control Yuan's request and the ministry's inquiries to local governments were part of standard procedure when handling a public petition. Huang said there was no political motive behind it.

So far, Kaohsiung and Tainan counties have replied and said the expenses were covered by the Tibet Religious Foundation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the de facto representative office of the Tibetan government in exile in Taiwan.

"The Dalai Lama wouldn't even let me pay for his lunch when we stopped for a lunch break in Jiasian Township (嘉山)" after visiting the disaster-torn Siaolin Village (沙林), Kaohsiung County Commissioner Yang Chiu-hsing (楊秋興) said.

"Not a cent of the expenses for the Dalai Lama's visit came out of the Kaohsiung City treasury," Kaohsiung Mayor Chen Chu (陳菊) said.

Sonam Dorjee, secretary-general of the Tibetan representative office, confirmed that the office had covered the monk's expenses.

Huang said she did not think it would have been a problem if the local governments had covered the expenses.

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“Separation of religion and state as stipulated in the Constitution means that the government is responsible of protecting everyone’s freedom of religion and should refrain from interfering in religion,” Huang said. “Government agencies sponsor religious events on a regular basis, so I don’t see a problem with it.”

That explanation, however, did not convince Taiwan Friends of Tibet chairwoman Chow Mei-li (周美莉), who believes the probe should not have started in the first place.

“As the government authority in charge of religious affairs, the MOI should have told the Control Yuan there was no problem, instead of sending inquiries to the local governments,” Chow said.

Chow said she would file similar petitions to question the Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission’s sponsoring of a Tibetan Buddhist service to commemorate the typhoon victims at the end of last month and whether President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) had violated the separation of religion and state by taking part in several religious services for typhoon victims.

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