

## Vatican denies deal is near with Beijing

Written by Taipei Times

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Catholic clergy yesterday arrive for mass on Holy Thursday, ahead of Easter celebrations at Beijing's government sanctioned South Cathedral in Beijing.

**Photo: AFP**

A historic deal between China and the Vatican on the appointment of bishops is not "imminent," a Vatican spokesman said yesterday, contradicting a Beijing-approved bishop.

"I can state that there is no imminent signature of an agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China," Vatican spokesman Greg Burke said in a statement.

"I would like to stress that the Holy Father Francis remains in constant contact with his collaborators on Chinese issues and is accompanying the steps of the ongoing dialogue," Burke added.

Earlier in the day, the state-owned Global Times newspaper had quoted Bishop Guo Jincai (郭金才), secretary-general of the Bishops Conference of the Catholic Church in China, as saying that negotiations with the Vatican had reached "the final stages."

"If everything goes right, the deal could be signed as early as the end of this month," said Guo, who is recognized by the state-run Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, apparently meaning before Easter Sunday.

The Vatican relaunched long-stalled negotiations with Beijing three years ago. The two sides appear close to resolving a major obstacle to progress: the question of who gets to designate

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bishops — China or the Holy See.

Under the deal, the Vatican could agree to recognize seven bishops who were chosen by the Chinese government in the hope that Beijing would accept the pope's authority as head of the Catholic Church in China, a source close to the matter said last month.

While some believe that an agreement would bridge divisions between the association, whose clergy are chosen by the Chinese Communist Party, and an unofficial underground church loyal to the Vatican, others fear concessions to Beijing might backfire on the “underground” devout.

Some opponents — among them Hong Kong's retired Cardinal Joseph Zen (譚栢根) — have said that the agreement risks abandoning loyal believers and amounts to a deal with the devil.

Last month, an open letter by lay Catholics mostly based in Hong Kong expressed concern that the recognition of Beijing-appointed bishops would lead to “confusion and pain, and schism would be created.”

Eric Lai (賴岳光), one of the letter's initiators, said it would be “shocking” if it was true that the deal would go through this weekend.

“This weekend the Church celebrates the Easter Vigil. It would be ironic to see a deal unfavorable to Chinese Catholics exercising true faith made at this time,” he said.

“Up to now I see no willingness of the Chinese government to compromise on its tight control over religion,” Lai added.

On Tuesday night, Chinese police released an underground bishop at the heart of the Beijing-Vatican negotiations after holding him for a day, sources said on Wednesday.

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Vincent Guo Xijin (郭新津), bishop of the diocese of Mindong in Fujian Province, is recognized by the Vatican, but not by the association.

He was recently urged by the Vatican to step aside for state-appointed Bishop Vincent Zhan Silu (詹士路) and to accept being demoted to auxiliary bishop, as part of preparations for the agreement.

According to Catholics consulted by AsiaNews, which is run by the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions, Guo's disappearance can be explained by his refusal to celebrate Easter with the prelate who is to replace him.

Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Lu Kang (陆慷) on Wednesday said he was not aware of Guo's situation.

However, he added that the "Chinese government fully respects and protects, according to the law, the rights of religious belief and freedom of its citizens."

According to information published on Monday by French daily La Croix, a Chinese delegation is expected in Rome this week.

However, a Vatican source yesterday said it still did not know when the Chinese delegation would arrive in Rome.

In Taipei, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Andrew Lee (李俊宏) yesterday said that the ministry and the nation's embassy in Vatican would continue to closely watch developments.

"We will do our utmost to safeguard our diplomatic ties [with the Holy See]," Lee said.

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He expressed the hope that the Holy See and other like-minded countries would continue to support Taiwan's effort to increase its international participation despite mounting pressure from China.

Additional reporting by staff writer

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