

China eyes grand plan to develop Tibetan regions

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China's top leaders say Tibet's development must include Tibetan areas in neighboring provinces — a move likely aimed at tying the region tighter to the rest of the country after deadly riots two years ago.

Chinese President Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) told the first high-level meeting on Tibet in nine years that the development would require hard work to prevent “penetration and sabotage” by separatists working for Tibet's independence, Xinhua news agency reported late on Friday.

Hu also said at this week's meeting that residents' awareness of being part of China should be constantly enhanced, Xinhua reported.

The meeting was the first of its kind since the deadly riots in March 2008, the largest uprising against Chinese rule in decades.

China's leaders agreed in the meeting from Monday through Wednesday last week to develop Tibetan regions in neighboring Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan provinces as well, Xinhua said. Most, if not all, saw protests shortly after the 2008 violence.

One expert on Tibet said China's leaders like to “homogenize” Tibet's problems as a development issue to downplay the region's distinct culture.

“They're persisting in this argument that it's all about money and that Tibetans have no other concerns,” said Michael Davis, a professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. “Including or connecting the Tibetan Autonomous Region with other autonomous areas may just be more of that. Maybe I'm too suspicious.”

Davis said the move to include areas outside Tibet in the development drive seems to be more about connecting them to the rest of China than to each other.

The research director for the government-backed China Tibetology Research Center, Lian Xiangmin (连祥敏), told the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post in a report yesterday that widening the development focus to other Tibetan areas was a major policy change.

Hu said the per capita income of Tibet's farmers and herdsmen should be close to the national level by 2020, Xinhua reported. As of last year, it was barely one quarter of the national average of about US\$2,000 a year, the government said.

China this month appointed a former soldier as Tibet's new governor, reasserting hardline policies there in the face of resentment over political restrictions and perceived economic exploitation.

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