

White House confirms Obama to meet Dalai Lama

Written by Taipei Times

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The White House is standing tough on US President Barack Obama's plans to meet the Dalai Lama, firmly rejecting Chinese pressure to snub him as rows escalate between Washington and Beijing.

The Chinese government reacted yesterday to the plans by saying it "resolutely opposes" the Dalai Lama's visit to the US and any of his meetings with US leaders.

"We urge the US side to clearly recognize the high sensitivity of the Tibet issue and handle related issues carefully and appropriately to avoid causing more harm to Sino-US ties," Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ma Zhaoxu (马晓旭) said in a statement.

"The president told China leaders during his trip last year that he would meet with the Dalai Lama, and he intends to do so," White House Spokesman Bill Burton told reporters. "The Dalai Lama is an internationally respected religious and cultural leader, and the president will meet with him in that capacity."

The Dalai Lama is due in the US for a 10-day trip later this month, his secretary said, and will be in Washington from Feb. 17 to Feb. 19 before speaking and teaching engagements in Los Angeles and Florida.

Obama has sought wide-ranging ties with the rising Asian power on issues from the global economy to North Korea. Burton said the president remained committed to "building a positive, comprehensive and cooperative relationship with China."

In October, Obama avoided meeting the Dalai Lama when he visited Washington. The move was controversial at home, but the White House said Obama did not want to sour ties with Beijing before his maiden visit to China.

Ma said the two sides had discussed the issue during Obama's visit to China in November, when Chinese leaders stated their "firm opposition toward any national leader or government official meeting the Dalai Lama."

But Burton said "we have human rights concerns about the treatment of Tibetans. We urge the government of China to protect the unique cultural and religious traditions of Tibet."

Meanwhile, a senator said on Tuesday he had asked 30 US companies, including Apple, Facebook and Skype, for information on their human rights practices in China after Google's decision no longer to cooperate with Chinese Web censorship.

"Google sets a strong example in standing up to the Chinese government's continued failure to respect ... fundamental human rights," Assistant Senate Majority Leader Dick Durbin said in a statement. "I look forward to learning more about whether other American companies are willing to follow Google's lead."

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Durbin, who chairs the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law, said his panel would hold a hearing in March to question Google and other firms.

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