

Beijing tells US to stop meddling

Mon, Dec 15, 2003

SPEAKING OUT Pro-democracy comments by Washington's top diplomat in Hong Kong to businessmen were described as 'irresponsible' by China's Foreign Ministry

AP , HONG KONG

Beijing accused the top US diplomat here of improperly meddling in Hong Kong's affairs by saying local people should have more political power.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry office in Hong Kong lashed out at "irresponsible remarks" by American Consul General James Keith, according to a dispatch from the state-run Xinhua News Agency.

"It must be pointed out that the issue of Hong Kong political development is China's internal affair and we firmly oppose any foreign interference on this issue," a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman was quoted as telling Xinhua on Saturday. The spokeswoman was not identified by name.

Speaking to an audience of business leaders here Thursday, Keith praised a mass rally by 500,000 people on July 1 that forced the Hong Kong government to shelve an anti-subversion bill, and said Hong Kong should soon open up a debate on more democracy.

"The wisdom and maturity of the people's call for better government was unmistakable, and the world took note," Keith said, adding that Washington would like to see Hong Kong people get as much political clout as possible through democratic reforms.

The July 1 march threw Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa's (董建華) government into crisis, and he has pledged to rebuild confidence by listening more closely to public opinion.

The rally was seen as a turning point in Hong Kong politics, firing up people who voted in record numbers in local council races last month to hand a stunning defeat to Hong Kong's top pro-Beijing party.

"Since July 1, I've been encouraged by the best mood in Hong Kong since I've been here," Keith said.

The Hong Kong government's allies are now worried that they might lose control of the legislature in September, when ordinary voters will pick 30 of 60 seats. Special-interest groups will choose the rest.

Hong Kong's mini-constitution sets out democracy as an eventual goal but there is no timetable.

Hong Kong people can theoretically choose their leader in 2007 and many now are clamoring for that right.

Pro-Beijing figures are hoping that if it happens, the nomination process will be closed

to ensure that no candidate unacceptable to the central government gets on the ballot. The central government recently served notice that Hong Kong people cannot change the system entirely on their own.

Beijing's latest statement on Xinhua said Hong Kong's political structure will evolve according to the law and the "one country, two systems" principle that was put in place when Britain handed this former colony back to China in 1997. The system allows for considerable autonomy and Western-style freedoms as Hong Kong preserves its freewheeling capitalist ways.

"The long-term prosperity and stability of Hong Kong is not only beneficial to all the Chinese people including the Hong Kong compatriots, but also in the interests of all investors from foreign countries including the United States," Xinhua quoted the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman as saying.

US consular spokeswoman Susan Stevenson defended Keith's remarks and said yesterday that in his speech and on many other occasions he has called the territory's affairs "an issue for Hong Kong people and the Hong Kong government."