

China flexes military muscle in Hong Kong, US asks Beijing to respect civil liberties

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On the 20th anniversary of Hong Kong's handover to Beijing's rule, China asserted its authority with President Xi Jinping inspecting Chinese troops based in Hong Kong in an open-top jeep.

Photo: AP. President Xi inspecting Chinese troops in Hong Kong

However, the United States urged China to respect civil liberties including press freedom in Hong Kong.

Xi Jinping rode in an open-top jeep past rows of soldiers lined up on an airstrip on his visit to the People's Liberation Army garrison.

He called out "Salute all the comrades" and "Salute to your dedication" as he rode by each of the 20 troop formations.

Armored personnel carriers, combat vehicles, helicopters and other pieces of military hardware were arrayed behind the troops.

It was a rare display of the Chinese military's might in Hong Kong, where it normally maintains a low-key presence.

Xi, wearing a buttoned-up black jacket in the steamy heat, spent about 10 minutes reviewing the troops at the Shek Kong base in Hong Kong's suburban New Territories. It's part of a visit to mark the 20th anniversary of Hong Kong's handover, when Britain gave up control of the Asian financial hub to China on July 1, 1997.

Hong Kong was granted the freedom to run most of its affairs after it came under China's control under the "one country, two systems" principle. However, Beijing is in charge of the city's defense and foreign affairs and the troops based in the city are deployed from the mainland.

Xi's three-day visit to mark the anniversary includes presiding at the inauguration of the city's new leader, Carrie Lam, on Saturday.

Security has been tight for his visit as authorities brace for protests.

Some 26 people, including young activist leader Joshua Wong, have been released on bail after being arrested for protesting on Wednesday. The department said Friday the activists have not been charged but are required to report back to police in September.

The activists, some of whom were detained more than 30 hours, had climbed onto a giant flower sculpture that was a gift from Beijing and is near the hotel complex where Xi is staying.

The US State Department on Thursday said that the success of Hong Kong, which was given a large degree of autonomy when British colonial rule ended in 1997, was due to its unique status.

“The United States... admires the city's outstanding achievements, which are the result of its high degree of autonomy, its economic and personal freedoms, and its respect for rule of law,” State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said.

“But while Washington valued its excellent cooperation with Hong Kong’s government it remains concerned about any infringements of civil liberties in Hong Kong, including intrusions on press freedoms,” she added.

- (With agency inputs)