

Obama under fire for shunning Dalai Lama
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US President Barack Obama was facing criticism he succumbed to Chinese pressure as the Dalai Lama opened his first visit to Washington in nearly two decades without a presidential meeting.

Tibet's exiled spiritual leader was set Tuesday to receive an award at the US Capitol complex a day after arriving for a week-long visit to the US capital that will also feature sold-out public talks on spirituality.

But for the first time since 1991, when the globetrotting Buddhist monk held his first presidential meeting with George HW Bush, the White House declined talks with the Nobel Peace laureate.

Obama has sought broader ties with China, a major trade partner and biggest holder of the soaring US debt. China sent troops into Tibet in 1950 and in recent months has ramped up pressure on other nations to shun the Dalai Lama.

The State Department said Obama would see the Dalai Lama "at a mutually agreeable time." Supporters of the Tibetan leader are hoping for a meeting by year's end, after Obama pays his first presidential visit to China in November.

Some supporters of the Dalai Lama were outraged by Obama's decision, fearing that China could interpret it as *carte blanche* to clamp down on dissent in the Himalayan territory.

"This is a strategic snub that sends the wrong message to Beijing and to China's religious communities and rights activists," said Leonard Leo, chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, a non-partisan government panel.

"Tibetans are being harassed, tortured and jailed right now for simple devotion to the Dalai Lama," he said.

Rewarding China

In an editorial Tuesday, *The Wall Street Journal* was aghast that Obama was willing to offend China by imposing tire tariffs but not meeting "a religious leader who has long been a friend to the US and an advocate of human rights."

"Perhaps the administration is hoping for a return favour from Beijing for snubbing the man Chinese leaders label a 'splittist' and a 'wolf in sheep's clothing,'" the conservative newspaper said.

"But rewarding China's bullying only encourages such tactics," it said. China accuses the Dalai Lama of seeking to separate Tibet. The Dalai Lama espouses non-violence and says he is only seeking greater rights for Tibetans under Chinese rule.

State Department spokesman Ian Kelly denied that the administration was downplaying human rights and said that Maria Otero, the US special coordinator on Tibet, would meet the Dalai Lama on his current trip.

"We've decided to meet with the Dalai Lama because of our respect for his position, for the fact that he is a revered spiritual leader," Kelly told reporters.

"Our position regarding China is clear, that we want to engage China. We think China is an important global player," Kelly said.

The Dalai Lama's entourage politely accepted Obama's decision. Lodi Gyari, the Dalai Lama's negotiator in infrequent talks with Beijing, said the Tibetans took a "broader and long-term perspective" that it was better to meet after Obama's visit to China.

"The Dalai Lama has always been supportive of American engagement with China," Gyari said in a statement.

"Our hope is that the cooperative US-Chinese relationship that President Obama's administration seeks will create conditions that support the resolution of the legitimate grievances of the Tibetan people," he said.

China waiting for his death

Elliot Sperling, a Tibet expert at Indiana University, said the Dalai Lama's team was putting a good face on a bad situation as China's influence grows.

"Tibet's government-in-exile is in a sense playing along, hoping that this will make China more amenable to speaking with the Dalai Lama," Sperling said.

"But China's policy is very clear - to bide its time until the Dalai Lama dies and in the meantime to whittle away whatever influence he has," he said.

China last year called off a summit with European leaders after French President Nicolas Sarkozy met the 74-year-old Dalai Lama. South Africa later refused even to let the Dalai Lama visit the country.

- *AFP*

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