

Britain's Labour government clamps down on protests during visit by Chinese premier

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The first visit by a Chinese head of state to Britain witnessed vigorous attempts to stifle protests by the Blair Labour government. Demonstrations by human rights activists, right-wing anti-communists and pro-Tibet campaigners were planned throughout the four-day visit to London by Chinese President Jiang Zemin.

To prevent any embarrassment, laws prohibiting demonstrations in London's Royal Parks were stringently enforced and police removed banners from protesters that had gathered on the Mall. By Thursday, four people had been arrested. The decision to attempt to prevent the Chinese leader witnessing any signs of protest was taken following similar demonstrations during Jiang Zemin's visit to Switzerland in March, after which he told the Swiss parliament "you have lost a good friend". The Chinese embassy warned the Blair government that demonstrations by "a small number of hostile elements" would "undermine the relations" between China and Europe.

The British government has been amongst the most vociferous advocates of economic sanctions against countries such as Iraq and Serbia, which it deems to be breaching human rights. In contrast, Labour went out of its way to insist that full and open co-operation with the Beijing regime was the only way forward. The government was prepared to suppress democratic rights to ensure there was no public criticism of the Chinese regime. Jiang Zemin's itinerary included inspecting a guard of honour on Horseguards' Parade, a ride in the state carriage with the Queen to Buckingham Palace and a state banquet there on Tuesday evening.

In an interview with BBC News Online, Labour MP Ben Chapman, chair of the all party parliamentary group on China, explained the real motives behind this decision. Putting Britain's relations with China on a "good footing" was of "massive importance", he said.

"China is potentially a massive market and will be a massive external investor in the none too distant future."

Jiang Zemin's stay in Britain is part of a major tour that also includes France, Portugal, Morocco, Algeria and Saudi Arabia. It is aimed at championing China's efforts to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and attract investment and trade. Talks on WTO membership were suspended after NATO's bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, which provoked angry protests in China. But US President Clinton and Jiang Zemin have since agreed to restart the process. Britain has much to gain from such an agreement. It is already Europe's biggest investor in China, with more than 2,000 joint ventures under way. During Jiang Zemin's visit the Department of Trade and Industry unveiled further deals, including a £1.5 billion venture between BP Amoco and Sinopec, the Chinese chemical company. This makes the British firm China's largest investor. Other UK businesses like British Telecom are just as eager to exploit the vast Chinese market.

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