

Printed April 05, 2008 01:27am AEST

India warns Dalai Lama over protests

Bruce Loudon, South Asia correspondent | *April 03, 2008*

INDIA yesterday bowed to intense pressure from China and warned the Dalai Lama, who has lived in exile in the Indian city of Dharamsala for the past 50 years, to "keep out of politics" while in the country.

In a delicate balancing act, India enjoys a trading relationship with China expected to be worth \$US40 billion (\$44billion) this year, while also hosting the Tibetan leader, his government-in-exile and followers.

Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee said that while India would continue to offer the Dalai Lama "all hospitality," he and his followers "should not do any political activity that can adversely affect the relations between India and China".

Mr Mukherjee's warning came after Tibetan protesters stormed the Chinese embassy in New Delhi, located close to the Australian High Commission.

The official warning comes ahead of the arrival in the Indian capital of the Olympic torch, with fears this could spark further protests, which New Delhi worries could affect its relations with Beijing.

A spokesman for the Dalai Lama last night insisted the spiritual leader was not engaged in any political activity. "His holiness is engaged in working to protect Tibetan rights and the preservation of the Tibetan culture," the spokesman said.

Mr Mukherjee's warning was an ominous development for the 200,000 Tibetan refugees in India, many of whom were at the forefront of anti-China demonstrations ahead of the Games.

India has been concerned to control the anti-Chinese demonstrations over Tibet, and has been accused by critics of adopting a "supine" and "unprincipled" approach to the issue.

Commentator Claude Arpi wrote yesterday that India's recognition of Tibet as part of China, and its agreement to curb the activities of the Tibetan exiles, "illustrates the wishy-washiness of the United Progressive Alliance regime (the ruling coalition) which allows Beijing to twist New Delhi's arm".

A Tibetan exile, Tenzing Rama, said: "The Indian government's attitude is spineless and unprincipled. Business talks. We don't matter."

But India's soccer captain, Bhaichung Bhutia, has refused to carry the Olympic torch during its run through New Delhi this month, in protest over the Chinese crackdown in Tibet.

Bhutia is the first athlete in the world to refuse to bear the torch.

Copyright 2008 News Limited. All times AEDT (GMT +11).