

Tibetan monks beaten as police halt dissent

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By Jane Macartney

Beijing - Hundreds of Tibetan Buddhist monks celebrating the award of a US honour to the exiled Dalai Lama have clashed with Chinese police, resulting in an unknown number of injuries and arrests.

Such violence has become unusual in recent years as China has tightened its grip on the region. The entry by police into Drepung monastery, on the outskirts of the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, was a sign of the hard line adopted against any sign of dissent.

Dozens of monks had begun repainting with whitewash the exterior of a hall assigned as the residence of the Dalai Lama inside Drepung to show their joy after the US Congress awarded its highest civilian honour, personally bestowed by President Bush in Washington last week.

Members of the paramilitary People's Armed Police moved in to stop the monks, who left peacefully to take part in morning prayers. When the monks returned to resume painting the police moved in again, resulting in violent scuffles, according to sources who declined to be identified for fear of repercussions. The Hong Kong newspaper Ming Pao said that the clash involved hundreds of monks.

Three thousand armed police surrounded the sprawling monastery, once the largest in the world with as many as 10,000 monks in residence, and refused to allow anyone to leave. Local sources said that hundreds of monks may have been arrested and several injured. Similar clashes were reported at the smaller Nechung monastery.

China, which reviles the Dalai Lama as a separatist, denounced the award of the Congressional Gold Medal as a "farce" that would hurt relations between Beijing and Washington. Beijing called in the US Ambassador and said that the decision had gravely undermined ties between the countries.

The clashes coincided with China's ruling Communist Party concluding its 17th Congress yesterday with an announcement that it had included a reference to religion in its constitution for the first time.

Officials have been enraged by the loyalty of Tibetans to the Dalai Lama, who fled into exile in 1959 after an abortive uprising against Chinese rule and has since lived in India. So nervous is China at his persistent influence among the deeply religious Tibetans that it has banned all photographs of him.