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Nobel institute says India will participate in ceremony to felicitate jailed Chinese dissident who won peace prize

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New Delhi - The Indian government announced a visit by Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao to Delhi next week on a day the Norwegian Nobel Institute confirmed that India will be attending the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony to felicitate jailed Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo.

Wen's visit is intended to bring India-China ties back on even keel after being buffeted by Beijing issuing stapled visas to Kashmiris and its refusal to give a visa to an Indian general in charge of Jammu and Kashmir.

India's foreign ministry issued a release that said Wen will pay "a state visit" to the country 15-17 December.

Until press time, the ministry did not respond to queries asking whether its ambassador in Norway would attend the 10 December ceremony conferring the Nobel Peace Prize on Liu, branded by China as a criminal. Benedicte Koren, spokeswoman for the Norwegian Nobel Institute, confirmed India's presence by phone from Oslo.

"I can confirm that India will be attending," Koren said, adding that the deadline for responding to invitations to attend the ceremony had closed on Monday.

She also confirmed that 19 countries including China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Colombia, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Serbia, Iraq, Iran, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Venezuela, the Philippines, Egypt, Sudan, Ukraine, Cuba and Morocco had declined the invitation.

Two countries—Sri Lanka and Algeria—had not responded to the invitation, while 44 countries have accepted it, a statement posted on the Norwegian Nobel Committee's website said.

India's participation at the Nobel ceremony comes after reports that its ambassador in Beijing, S. Jaishankar, was asked by China to boycott the function at a meeting of a group of ambassadors and envoys a few weeks ago. China has threatened there will be "consequences" for countries that show their support for Liu by attending the 10 December event.

“India has never been party to any international move to condemn China on its human rights record. Neither has India criticized China as a matter of policy, so India’s presence at the ceremony cannot be taken as a statement of approval or disapproval of Chinese actions,” said former foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal.

India is expected to discuss a wide range of security and strategic issues including concerns over stapled visas to Kashmiris, activities of Chinese firms in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, Beijing’s military sales to Pakistan and close China-Pakistan civil nuclear cooperation. According to the Press Trust of India news agency, Wen will travel to Pakistan after his visit here.

Ahead of Wen’s visit, both countries held a meeting of their special representatives—Chinese state councillor Dai Binggao and India’s national security adviser Shiv Shankar Menon—to narrow decades-old differences over their common boundary, the result of a brief but bitter 1962 border conflict.

Foreign secretary Nirupama Rao said last week that both sides were working on some additional measures to secure peace and stability along their undecided border while asking China to respect Indian sensitivities on issues such as Kashmir, a six-decade-old dispute with Pakistan that has triggered two of the three wars between the neighbours since 1947.

Besides India, South Korea, too, has confirmed attendance at the Nobel Prize ceremony.

China is South Korea’s biggest trade partner, but Beijing’s refusal to condemn North Korea for a deadly shelling attack on the South has sparked much hostile media comment in Seoul. In Beijing, China’s foreign ministry said more than 100 countries supported its position.

Liu, a former professor and author, was jailed in December 2009 for 11 years on subversion charges after co-authoring Charter 08, a manifesto that spread quickly on the Internet calling for political reform and greater rights in China.

The laureate, who remains in prison, will not be able to attend and neither will his wife, Liu Xia, who has been held in house arrest since the prize was announced in October.

An empty chair, a photograph and one of his texts read by Norwegian actress Liv Ullman, will represent Liu at the ceremony.

AFP and PTI contributed to this story.