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UK angry at high-profile PLA arrival

4,000 troops set for dawn deployment

CHRIS YEUNG and EMMA BATHA

More than 4,000 People's Liberation Army troops will pour into the territory six hours after the hand-over at dawn on Tuesday.

They will come by land, air and sea, and their 400-strong convoy of vehicles will include 21 armoured cars.

The main body will follow a first group of 509 armed troops which is due to cross the border at 9 pm on Monday.

News of the PLA arrival came from the Chief Executive-designate's office after it was informed of the arrangements by Beijing yesterday.

The deployment will increase the total number of Chinese troops to about 4,700. An advance party of 196 personnel is already in the territory.

A source close to Mr Tung's office said it was understood there would be no further troop deployment, although earlier estimates of the garrison were put at 10,000.

However, the news that the convoy will include armoured cars angered British officials.

The Governor, Chris Patten, denounced the news as a "most appalling signal" to Hong Kong people and vowed to continue lobbying Chinese officials to reverse the decision.

"For several weeks we have said to the experts and the PLA

that it would be a very bad signal for Hong Kong and for the rest of the world to deploy armoured carriers at that time," he said.

"The use of armoured cars is absolutely unnecessary and completely inappropriate. The troops should enter gradually.

"The PLA is quite properly coming to Hong Kong as a symbol of Chinese sovereignty. But the internal security of Hong Kong is a matter for the Hong Kong police.

"This is a community noted for its stability and harmony."

Britain was told of the deployment yesterday.

A Foreign Office statement said: "We have consistently urged the Chinese to handle the deployment of the garrison with the greatest possible sensitivity.

"We recognise that the defence of Hong Kong after June 30 is a matter for the Chinese authorities but we are concerned that the manner of the deployment may send a negative signal to the people of Hong Kong and the international community."

The main PLA contingent will arrive at 6 am by land, sea and air routes in 10 ships, six helicopters, 21 armoured cars and 400 other vehicles.

It is believed 28 vehicles will head for the Gallipoli Lines and San Wai Tai Ling Range via Shataukok.

Another 174 vehicles will pass

through the New Territories and urban areas via Man Kam To to the Stonecutters Island naval base, Osborne Barracks, Gun Club Barracks and Stanley Fort.

Meanwhile, 215 vehicles will head for Cassino Lines and the Tam Mi and Sek Kong camps via Huanggang.

The naval vessels will arrive from the west in two formations, and sail to Stonecutters Island.

The helicopters will fly over Man Kam To control point to Sek Kong air base.

No details were available on the destination and route of the armoured cars, nor of the weapons the PLA will carry.

The Democratic Party spokesman on security matters, James To Kun-sun, said he saw no problem over the deployment, while Liberal Party chief Allen Lee Peng-fei urged people not to be overly concerned.

But legislator Emily Lau Wahing warned that the high-profile arrival might stir up bad feelings towards the Chinese troops.

The White House also accepted the move. An official in Washington said: "We understand that this is what was always expected, that they would be garrisoning up to 10,000 troops in Hong Kong, and this is the first wave."