

1997 garrison now ready, commanders meet press

First details of forces' make-up are revealed, but no strength is given

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China has completed formation of the post-1997 Hong Kong garrison of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), bringing to an end three years of stringent officer selection and training for the high-profile post.

The garrison, to be reviewed by members of the Preparatory Committee today, will be headed by Major-General Liu Zhenwu with Chen Zhishu as his deputy commander, according to the

New China News Agency (Xinhua).

The force of ground, naval and air units will enter Hong Kong "at zero hour on July 1, 1997" to mark the handover by raising the Chinese five-star flag, Xinhua quoted Liu as saying.

Speaking at the garrison base in Shenzhen, Liu added that the force would be smaller than that maintained by Britain. But he gave no figure.

Estimates of the size of the garrison vary from 2,500 troops to more than 10,000.

However, most observers

and defence analysts believe that about 8,000 troops will make up the Hong Kong force, with the majority working in a logistics or support capacity across the border in Guangdong province.

The garrison will include soldiers from all three services of the PLA to assure defence of China's land, sea and air space, Liu said.

But the troops could also be used to bolster police actions when authorised by Beijing, he added.

"The government of the Hong Kong special adminis-

trative region may, when necessary, ask the central people's government for assistance from the forces in maintenance of public order and in disaster relief," he noted.

Liu said worries that the troops would engage in production and business, as the PLA is encouraged to do in China, were "completely unnecessary", and he reiterated Beijing's vow to fully fund the garrison, collecting no taxes from the Hong Kong people for its maintenance.

Liu added that a "closed-door policy" would be in operation, under which officers and soldiers may only leave their camps on official duties or with prior authorisation.

Also speaking at the garrison

base, Chen said he was ready to reverse Hong Kong's loss to Britain a century ago, a national shame that still haunted his family.

"My great-grandfather Chen Yihuai was an officer of the Qing dynasty's Hunan Army.

"Hong Kong was lost by the hand of the Qing army," Chen told Xinhua.

"We've been waiting 100 years. We are confident we can build the Hong Kong army station into the world's first rank."

Xinhua for the first time revealed details about the force, praising the strong revolutionary background of the land, air and sea corps.

According to military sources, the main body of the ground force will be the First Regiment of the Red Army

established in the Autumn Harvest Uprising led by Mao Zedong in 1927.

After the founding of the People's Republic, the army took part in the Korean War and recorded a number of "brilliant feats", Xinhua said.

The navy force to be stationed in Hong Kong was originally a submarine chasers brigade established in 1959.

The troops took part in China's first naval battle and have experience operating in the South China Sea, near the disputed Spratly Islands and the Beibu Gulf.

The air unit has managed missile and satellite launches, and flown special aircraft for the paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, and the late premier Zhou Enlai, Xinhua said.

2-6
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