

Big push to lure students back

CHINA has launched an all-out offensive to reverse a debilitating brain drain, dispatching official teams throughout the West to try to lure students back with guarantees of more freedom and money.

A government-organised delegation recently ended a tour of the United States that included stops at more than 30 universities.

Other delegations also visited Japan, Australia and six west European countries this month.

The different groups visited a total of 85 cities, meeting with more than 10,400 students, one-tenth of the estimated student body abroad, the official media reported.

Initial results showed that the first such campaign was starting to pay off. Already, 466 students had decided to return and 1,890 had expressed their intention to come back, the reports said.

In the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Square

crackdown on student-led protests, many students overseas who took part in anti-government activities and a host of dissidents who escaped ruled out returning, fearing persecution.

But with an end to Beijing's isolation and the rush by Western countries to enter the rapidly expanding Chinese market, Chinese exiles abroad find themselves increasingly on the fringes and disenfranchised with the West.

Many have been forced to take menial jobs as funds to support them dry up with the memory of Tiananmen, and are eager to return.

But doubts about possible persecution persist.

The delegations tried to allay such concerns, reiterating Beijing's recent pledge to provide an amnesty for all students, no matter what their political activities, as long as they cut ties with all overseas anti-government groups.

The government has also rejected allegations it would punish them.

*Beijing's effort to reverse a debilitating brain drain is paying off, writes **William Brent** of Agence France-Presse*

The message conveyed by the delegations was: "We support overseas study, we welcome you to return, and allow freedom to come and go."

"In the future, we will continue to organise delegations to meet with overseas students and pass on the motherland's concern and confidence," Chinese Education Minister Li Tieying was quoted as saying.

The Chinese government is in dire need of well-trained scholars to help implement its new drive to further open up and shift to a market economy.

Only one-third of the estimated 150,000 students who left to study abroad since China began its reforms in 1978 have returned.

The vast majority, about 70,000, reside in the United States. Beijing protested against Washington's decision last month giving Chinese students the right to permanent residency.

Pro-democracy forces in Beijing say the Chinese exiles are increasingly out of touch with the huge changes in their country.

"There is a growing realisation on their part that they will be able to do little unless they return," one veteran liberal said.

Of the 6,700 students who attended sessions held by the US delegation, more than 1,200 expressed interest in returning to China, the reports said.

Education officials attributed the growing interest in coming back to the government's new policies, senior leader Deng Xiaoping's successful relaunching of faster reforms, and the adoption last month of a market economy.

The arrest in Beijing in

September of student dissident Shen Tong, who returned from the United States, increased students' wariness to return.

But Shen was released and deported a month later, despite violating Beijing's precondition that he break off ties with anti-government groups.

The delegations were made up of senior officials and executives from government ministries, leading universities, cities in China's booming coastal region and major state enterprises.

Among some of the incentives to return are new regulations that exempt overseas students from import duties on cars, electronic appliances, personal computers and scientific equipment.

Students who return have also been promised freedom of job choice and residency as well as preferential treatment in finding housing, starting up businesses and schooling for their children.

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