

# Agreement hopes fade

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**T**he Sino-British Joint Liaison Group (JLG) meets today for the first time in six months, with few signs that it will reach any agreements on issues affecting Hong Kong.

The three-day session is seen as crucial for the final agreement on the future of military land in the territory.

Britain had been hoping at the end of the last meeting in December that the two countries might have been able to step up the pace of their formal talks in a bid to clear the backlog of work.

But the failure to conclude the seven-year dialogue over defence lands during informal

talks has put back the date for a plenary JLG session until now.

Despite desperate last-minute contacts, British officials are still uncertain whether an agreement on the thorny issue will be clinched over the next three days.

"[An agreement] is still up in the air, and it could go either way," a senior British official said yesterday.

It is understood that there is still a disagreement over the size of the future People's Liberation Army (PLA) naval base and some of the fine print in the overall agreement.

Britain has already warned that unless the issue is concluded at a JLG meeting this month, it would put in jeopardy the likelihood of an agree-

ment ever being reached. Part of the accord would be a British agreement to provide the PLA with a number of military installations, including a new naval base and military hospital.

Sources close to the JLG have warned that it would be impossible for these facilities to be constructed by 1997 if no agreement was reached at this month's plenary meeting.

Officials say it is unlikely the JLG talks will result in any agreement on other areas.

It is hoped that some progress will be made on the Right of Abode in Hong Kong after 1997 and visa-free arrangements for Special Administrative Region and British National Overseas passports.

There could also be progress on localisation and adaptation of laws covering the surrender of fugitive offenders, environment promotion and protection and shipping matters, as well as air service agreements.

There is growing concern that unless the pace of work in these areas is speeded up, Hong Kong will face a legal vacuum after 1997.

It is understood that it is unlikely the draft bill of the Court of Final Appeal will be discussed, although China may wish to raise the issue.

A copy of the proposed legislation was put to China more than a month ago through the JLG and Britain is still waiting for a formal response before the Government starts consulting the legal profession and legislators.

China has recently made conciliatory comments indicating that while it will never accept the Governor, Chris Patten's democratic reforms, co-operation is possible on a number of other issues.

British officials say the three-day meeting will be the first test of whether these positive comments will be translated into concrete progress.