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Activists to take^{3.1} seizure row to NPC

By Staff Reporters

A GROUP of Hongkong human rights activists will press local delegates to the Chinese National People's Congress to take up their case after they failed to deliver a petition containing 24,000 signatures demanding the release of political prisoners in China.

They also demanded an apology for the confiscation of the petition as "propaganda material" by customs officials at Tianjin airport on Tuesday.

But the Chinese authorities yesterday defended their action by maintaining that the seizure was in line with normal customs procedures.

They also said the refusal to allow one of the delegates into the country was justified under a set of "provisional administrative regulations".

At the same time, China declared it would not grant amnesty to prisoners to mark the 40th anniversary of the People's Republic.

The six-member delegation returned to Hongkong yesterday afternoon to a garland welcome from their supporters.

They denounced the Chinese action claiming it would adversely affect Hongkong people's confidence in China's pledge of "one country, two systems".

Although the delegates did not succeed in presenting the original petition, they said they had achieved a degree of success as they had drawn much attention both from Hongkong and the international community.

The original delegation of seven members arrived in Tianjin on Tuesday afternoon and had their petition, which they intended to submit to the People's Congress, impounded by customs officials, together with many other documents and magazines.

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One of the delegates, Mr Chong See-ming of the local magazine *Cheng Ming*, was not allowed entry and returned to Hongkong on the same plane within hours.

Earlier yesterday, the delegates succeeded in handing in an alternative petition, drafted after their original documents were retained by customs, to an NPC official in the morning before a large contingent of Hongkong reporters.

The party was tailed by police vehicles as it headed for the Great Hall of the People where the Congress was in session.

There was a brief confrontation between Hongkong reporters and security officers who tried to take away press releases handed out by the Hongkong delegation.

One of the group, Mr

Hans Lutz, was briefly barred from entering the building because he was not a Chinese, but he argued that he had been living in Hongkong for 20 years and therefore was a bona fide Hongkong resident. Only then was he allowed in.

The re-drafted petition was accepted by a mail-room clerk who identified himself only as a Mr Li.

As the drama was being unfolded outside the Great Hall of the People, Chinese officials held a series of press conferences to justify the Chinese action.

The deputy director of Tianjin Customs, Mr Huang Rufeng, was sent to the capital especially to explain what happened. He accused the group of trying to illegally import 2,000 items of printed matter.

"You can't say 2,000 is a reasonable amount," he said, without clarifying how this figure - apparently the total number of printed items carried by the group - had been calculated.

He would not say whether it was the petition or other printed documents that were objectionable, and declined to define what constituted a "reasonable amount".

Mr Huang was visibly shaken by the barrage of questions he faced from Hongkong journalists, most of which he did not answer.

He was unable to say, for example, whether the petition

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