

U.S. wins no concessions in Beijing

Two dissidents arrested without meeting Baker

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BEIJING — U.S. Secretary of State James Baker left Beijing yesterday almost empty-handed, a diplomatic failure that will likely bolster criticism of President George Bush's conciliatory China policy.

As an additional slap in the face, Chinese authorities detained at least two prominent dissidents, both of whom had been approached by the U.S. embassy to meet Mr. Baker.

Beijing emerged the clear winner in the high-stakes manoeuvring. Although U.S. sanctions remain on military co-operation and defence equipment sales, Mr. Baker's visit gave the hard-liners the stamp of legitimacy they have sought since June, 1989.

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"It has now been 2½ years since the Tiananmen Square tragedy. Unless we were to keep U.S.-China relations in the deep freeze forever, we had to start talking," Mr. Baker told a news conference last night.

"We accomplished some important things, but the gulf is still wide," he said. Characterizing the 18 hours of meetings as "difficult," he added that the bulk of the time was spent discussing human rights.

At 1 a.m. Saturday, police knocked on the door of Hou Xiaotian, who had agreed to meet Mr. Baker. As they forced her into a waiting car, Ms. Hou, 28, shouted: "You're kidnapping me. You will pay for this."

Ms. Hou, who spent five months in prison after the Tiananmen demonstrations, was taken to a guest house in Changping county, a rural area an hour's drive north of Beijing, where she was kept incommunicado. Her husband, Wang Juntao, is a prominent dissident who was convicted of being one of the "masterminds" at Tiananmen Square. He was sentenced to 13 years in prison last February.

Ms. Hou was released around 8:30 last night, after Mr. Baker's plane left Beijing. She told reporters she had been well treated while in custody and had played mahjong with her guards.

"I didn't meet them [Mr. Baker's party] because the police kidnapped me," Ms. Hou said. "Now I'm free, but I regret this because I missed the opportunity."

At noon Saturday, Chinese police also detained Dai Qing, 50, a distinguished journalist and outspoken critic of the government who was jailed for 10 months after the Tiananmen Square protests. Family members said that officials from her newspaper, the Guangming Daily, had telephoned with news of her release and said that she would be returned home later today.

Only Ms. Dai's arrest was known at the time of Mr. Baker's news conference. Asked about her fate, Mr. Baker said: "I really don't know anything about it, having come straight from meetings with the Chinese. And before that, I was at church. If it is true, it would be distressing news, something I would like to ask our ambassador to look into."

Ms. Dai, an irrepressible woman who speaks rapid-fire Chinese, was

His visit signalled that China has recovered from the diplomatic embarrassment of Tiananmen Square, and it sent a message to the Chinese people that the rest of the world is ready to do business as usual with Beijing. Last month, Canada ended a freeze on high-level exchanges with a visit by Agriculture Minister William McKnight.

Mr. Baker's three-day visit ended without a single major concession by the Chinese. Little progress was made in human rights or trade, two of the three principal areas under discussion.

Beijing did not release a single dissident, nor did it agree to allow humanitarian visits by neutral organizations such as the Red Cross. Mr. Baker said it promised to relax exit

permits for "any person with no criminal proceedings pending."

On trade, Mr. Baker said the two countries have agreed in principle on the text of a memorandum of understanding preventing the export to the United States of products made with prison labour.

In the third area, arms control. Beijing agreed to adhere to — but apparently not to sign — an international accord restricting missile sales. But the agreement depends on Washington lifting certain sanctions on high-speed computer sales and satellite licensing imposed after the Chinese army crushed pro-democracy demonstrations at Tiananmen Square in June, 1989.

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arrested in September, 1989. "Actually, I only went once to Tiananmen Square," she said in an unscripted telephone interview last week. "In fact, I was arrested because of my work on the Three Gorges." That year, Ms. Dai had organized other intellectuals to oppose the building of the world's largest hydroelectric dam at the Three Gorges on the Yangtze River.

After her release in May of 1990, Ms. Dai was ordered by her newspaper to stay at home and study ideology. She was selected for a coveted Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University this fall, but the government refused her an exit permit. The Guangming Daily sarcastically called Ms. Dai "so-called journalist" and asked Harvard to choose from among four other staff reporters instead. The university refused.

"Harvard's still waiting for me," Ms. Dai said.

On Saturday morning, Ms. Dai telephoned a friend to get an urgent message to the embassy. According to her husband, three officials from her newspaper suddenly came to her home, offering her an immediate out-of-town assignment. Ms. Dai refused and went to another location to await instructions from the U.S. embassy on the time and place for a meeting with Mr. Baker. Before the embassy reached her, Ms. Dai was detained.

Mr. Baker met Communist Party secretary Jiang Zemin, President Yang Shangkun, Premier Li Peng, foreign minister Qian Qichen and justice minister Cai Cheng. Reporters normally are permitted to watch the first few minutes of such meetings, during which the leaders usually trade pleasantries.

But these were a series of grim-faced photo opportunities, with the U.S. side apparently requesting that all handshakes be off-camera. Chinese officials forbade questions. The most awkward meeting was with the justice minister. During the photo opportunity, which lasted less than a minute, Mr. Baker and Mr. Cai sat in stony silence, each staring straight ahead.

At his meeting with Mr. Yang, Mr. Baker said: "This visit is indeed very important and should not fail. Although my visit is a risk, it offers an opportunity for the two sides to push forward Sino-U.S. relations."

Mr. Yang replied, "Exerting pressure can only strain relations and will be harmful to the settlement of problems between us."

Yesterday, Mr. Baker postponed his departure by nearly eight hours to continue talks with Mr. Qian, the foreign minister. Mr. Baker said Beijing had responded "by individual name" to a list of 800 political prisoners the United States submitted last June. He said that the Chinese had disclosed who on the list was convicted, under investigation, released or could not be identified. But Mr. Baker gave no further details.

It is not clear how much China will ease exit permits for dissidents. Even ordinary, law-abiding citizens, including some who are married to U.S. citizens, are routinely denied exit permits. Mr. Baker said the Chinese assured him that anyone would be allowed to leave "after normal procedures." At the moment, these include a visit to the applicant's local police station for a certificate stating that he or she did not take part in pro-democracy demonstrations in 1989.

U.S. sources said that the State Department had been given assurances before Mr. Baker arrived that he would not go away empty-handed. The Chinese were acutely aware of the importance the trip held for the Bush administration, which is coming in for sharp criticism by the Democrats in an election year.

"He [Mr. Baker] emphasized that it was a difficult decision for the U.S. to send him to China for a visit," said Wu Jianmin, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman. The talks were "every bit as tough, as difficult, if not tougher than those [just completed] in the Middle East," said Margaret Tutwiler, the U.S. State Department spokeswoman. "Mr. Baker expressed in exquisite detail the risks he took in coming here."

But the Chinese apparently felt little incentive to alter their current hard-line policy. "Whatever problems we have, some can be solved through talks. Others may need more rounds of talks. If some problems still cannot be settled, then you should just set them aside," Mr. Yang told Mr. Baker. Throughout the discussion, the Chinese urged the U.S. to focus on "common ground" and to forget about "the differences," an apparent allusion to the 1989 massacre.

Party chief Jiang Zemin quoted a classical Chinese poem to Mr. Baker. "If you want longer vision, you should move to a higher point," Mr. Jiang said.