

US turns blind eye on Chinese aid for LAF

Contributed by Andrew Wander, Daily Star staff
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Laf officers have been training at Chinese military academies for about three years

BEIRUT: China has donated over \$1 million in military aid to Lebanon for a program that has included sending senior Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) officers to study in a Chinese military academy, The Daily Star has learned. A source from the defense attache's department of the Chinese Embassy said that officers from several countries study at China's military academy and that the embassy is currently negotiating details of the program with the Lebanese government. "We are discussing training a few Lebanese officers at Chinese military colleges," he said. "Every year we invite military officers from other countries."

The official refused to specify the type of training that the LAF officers receive, saying that the details were unavailable.

China's 1.25 million-strong military, known as the People's Liberation Army, is the largest standing army in the world. As China's global position has strengthened, it has increasingly been seen as a threat by Western countries, including some of the LAF's strongest backers.

The European Union and the United States banned military cooperation with China as part of an arms embargo imposed after the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. China has attempted to have the ban lifted, but has been opposed by Washington, which has warned that cooperation would give China access to classified military techniques employed by the West. Lifting the ban, it has said, would have "serious consequences."

But recently there have been signs that the ban is being ignored. Earlier this month it was revealed that a Chinese officer had been trained by the British Army, despite the UK's previous strong support for the military boycott. LAF sources say that US officials are well aware that China is training some Lebanese officers.

The United States has spearheaded military aid to Lebanon, giving more than \$410 million in assistance since 2006. More than 500 LAF officers have undergone specialist US military training in subjects ranging from artillery to communications. Lebanese special-forces are also US-trained.

Retired LAF General Elias Hanna, now a senior lecturer at Notre Dame University, said that the Chinese had been training a small number of high-level Lebanese staff officers for about three years, but emphasized that the military's strongest links remain with Western countries. "The Lebanese military does not rely heavily on the Chinese," he said. "Usually we are Western-orientated, with officers training in the US and France."

He said that Washington had never had a problem with the officers being trained in China. "The Americans know how far the Chinese can go," he said. "The Chinese are not ready to anger the Americans yet."

China's prime minister, Wen Jiabao, met with President Michel Sleiman on Wednesday in New York, after which it was announced that China has donated more than \$3 million for projects in Lebanon.

In the past, China has supplied military equipment to some states that have frosty diplomatic relations with the US. Venezuela, whose outspoken President Hugo Chavez has repeatedly lambasted Washington's foreign policy, said on Thursday that it was expecting the delivery of Chinese training planes early next year.

Despite this, there is no suggestion that China's involvement with the Lebanese military has affected the Washington's position toward the LAF.

In an interview published on Thursday, David Hale, US deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, indicated that the Bush administration planned to provide the LAF with "stronger and more effective" equipment to help bolster the army.

Hale also announced a US congressional visit to Lebanon planned for October

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