

Tibet to re-open to foreign tourists Wednesday

Tibet will be re-opened to foreign tourists from Wednesday, lifting the tourist ban imposed in March after violent anti-Chinese protests in the regional capital of Lhasa, a local official said Tuesday.

The first foreign tourists, two Swedes, would arrive in Lhasa Wednesday, and four others from Singapore would come on Sunday, said Tanor, deputy director of the Tibet's tourism bureau.

Tibet has been re-opened to domestic tourists since April 23, followed by visitors from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan in May. As of June 20, the region had received more than 160 tour groups.

'The tourists experienced by themselves the stable situation, harmonious society and beautiful environment in Tibet,' Tanor said.

'The success of the Olympic torch relay held three days ago in Lhasa demonstrated that the foundation for the social stability has been further consolidated,' he added.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao also told reporters in Beijing Tuesday that Tibet would not change the policy of opening-up.

The regional government stopped issuing tourist permits to overseas travellers and the tourism authorities suggested travel agencies postpone organising tour groups in the wake of the riot. It cited safety concerns and the reconstruction of tourism facilities around scenic spots damaged in the unrest.

However, independent domestic travellers have not been prohibited from entering the region.

The riots that followed protests by Tibetans demanding independence led to the deaths of at least 18 civilians and one policeman. It also left 382 civilians and 241 police officers injured, businesses looted and residences, shops and vehicles torched.

Following three months, peace has gradually returned, with the resumption of schools, businesses and religious activities, as well as the re-opening of leading monasteries such as Jokhang, Ramoche, Sera and Drepung.

Tourism is one of the main sources of revenue for Tibet. The region received four million tourists, both domestic and foreign, last year, an increase by 60 percent from 2006.

Last year, Tibet's revenue from tourism reached 4.8 billion yuan (\$699 million), accounting for more than 14 percent of the region's gross domestic product.

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