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Africa holds attractions for China leaders

Beijing's hunger for raw materials and political recognition has its top officials crisscrossing the continent like no one else to cement ties.

By Robyn Dixon, Times Staff Writer

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA — There are many signs of China's booming relationship with Africa, from the soaring trade figures, including Beijing's burgeoning oil imports, to the Chinese-built stadiums, railways, power lines, dams and roads that are mushrooming across the continent.

But as Beijing hunts for the resources it needs to supply its seemingly insatiable economy, perhaps nothing conveys China's enthusiasm for Africa as much as the travel itineraries of Beijing's leaders. Last year, the Chinese president, premier and foreign minister all made trips to Africa, visiting 16 countries.

On Tuesday, President Hu Jintao left Beijing for a tour that will take him to eight African nations, including return visits by the Chinese leader to South Africa and Liberia.

"This is unprecedented. I can't think of any other head of state, including [South African President] Thabo Mbeki, who has visited as many African countries as that," said Martyn Davies, head of the Center for China Studies at Stellenbosch University in South Africa.

In November, China also was host to delegates from 48 African countries to the China-Africa Cooperation Forum in Beijing, promising to sharply increase assistance and offering \$5 billion in loans and credits. In exchange, Beijing wants African nations to recognize the People's Republic of China rather than Taiwan, which it views as a rogue province.

"For not recognizing Taiwan, African countries can get government-supported foreign direct investment, aid and military assistance 'with no political strings attached.' Goodbye U.S. and Europe; Hello China!" analyst Mark Sorbara wrote last April in the Nation newspaper of Nairobi, the Kenyan capital.

Major oil supplier

Hu is expected to sign deals and assistance packages, mostly flowing out of the November conference, during a tour that is to end Feb. 10.

China's trade with Africa is still well behind that of the United States, which had \$91 billion in bilateral trade with the continent last year. However, Chinese-African trade grew from about \$3 billion in 1995 to \$40 billion in 2005, and Beijing is aiming for \$100 billion by 2010. Africa now supplies one-third of China's crude oil, according to Chinese officials quoted by the People's Daily.

Beijing's intense courting of Africa has disturbed some Western powers — particularly the U.S., which is fearful of competition for energy resources. In addition, Western human rights organizations have criticized China's no-strings-attached investments in countries with poor records on rights and democracy, such as Sudan and Zimbabwe.

"I think there's a perception that up until now the U.S. and EU [European Union] have been the major investors in Africa, and now a new player has entered the field so you have to change the rules. So in terms of tying loans to human rights, they [Western lenders] have to adjust their approach," said Adam Wolfe, a China analyst with the independent Power and Interest News Report, based in Chicago and Rome.

China also is facing increased skepticism from African interest groups concerned about the effect of cheap Chinese imports on local industries, following the closures of textile mills in Lesotho and South

Africa. The Africans complain that the trade is one-sided, and that the Chinese import labor from home for major infrastructure projects and hold on to technology, creating few jobs or lasting benefits.

Analysts believe that China's basic approach of importing raw materials and exporting manufactured goods is unlikely to change. But the focus of Hu's visit indicates Chinese responsiveness to the criticism. He will spend two nights each in countries where the most serious concerns have been raised: South Africa and Zambia.

Working conditions

Last year, workers in Zambia rioted at a Chinese copper mine over pay and conditions. The issue surfaced during the country's presidential campaign, with a leading opposition candidate, Michael Sata, accusing China of exploitation. A provincial official wept on television when she saw the conditions of workers at one Chinese-owned coal mine.

The Chinese ambassador to South Africa, Liu Guijin, told reporters in Pretoria, the administrative capital, this week that Hu would tour the copper belt in Zambia and drive home the message that his government expects Chinese companies to act responsibly.

"I have personally read something about some unbecoming behavior of the Chinese companies. That's definitely not the Chinese government's policy," Liu said. "The president will encourage the Chinese corporations to integrate more appropriately with the local conditions and to work better to make more contributions to the local social and economic development."

So far, most African leaders have seized on Chinese investment and loans on easy terms, often finding it more advantageous to deal with China than the West. But Mbeki, whose country is China's second-largest trading partner on the continent after oil-rich Angola, has expressed concerns.

In a speech last year, the South African president warned of the danger of an unequal "colonial" relationship. Mbeki urged China to invest more in African manufacturing.

Davies, at Stellenbosch University, said the reality was that Africa was not a competitive location for manufacturing investment from anywhere, including China.

"Of course, Chinese investment will be significantly skewed to resources and energy extraction," he said. "You can't blame China's private sector for not investing in countries that are far away and that also don't have the necessary institutions and structures and policies in place, which African economies generally don't have."

Yet in a sign of how seriously China took Mbeki's speech, Liu said he had obtained a video of the remarks, only to find the key section was inaudible. He said China was committed to helping develop Africa's industrial base, but that it would take more than a decade.

The Sudan test

For human rights advocates, China's biggest test in Africa is its approach to Sudan, which Monday lost a bid for the chairmanship of the African Union because of its intransigence over Darfur. Pro-government militias have attacked villages in that region of western Sudan, sparking a prolonged humanitarian crisis.

China, with oil interests in southern Sudan, has been criticized by rights organizations for blocking U.N. Security Council sanctions against Sudanese officials.

"The African Union and most African countries would want to see some progress in resolving Darfur, and it's well known that the Chinese have been backstopping the intransigence of the Khartoum government on that. That's a major sticking point," said Francis Kornegay, a China analyst at the Johannesburg-based Center for Policy Studies.

Liu said the Chinese were concerned about the humanitarian crisis in Darfur and that Hu would pressure Sudanese President Omar Hassan Ahmed Bashir to be more cooperative with the international community on the issue.

But New York-based Human Rights Watch is calling for China to do more: support sanctions, help set up a trust fund for victims paid for by Sudanese oil revenue, take steps to monitor how Chinese weapons are used in Darfur and elsewhere, and examine human rights abuses by Sudan's armed forces in areas where Chinese oil companies are active.

The group took Hu to task in a letter dated Monday, saying:

"Consistent with China's international obligations, its aspirations to be seen as a responsible international power, and its claims to be a friend of the Sudanese people, there is a great deal more your government can do on Sudan."