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Nepal Puts Everest Off Limits During China's Olympic Torch Relay in May
By SOMINI SENGUPTA

NEW DELHI — There are two routes to the world's highest peak, and both are scheduled to be off limits to mountaineers this spring, as Beijing strives to inaugurate the Summer Olympics free of pro-Tibetan protests.

Chinese authorities confirmed this week that the route to the summit of Mount Everest along its north face, in Tibet, would be closed. Now, Nepal has decided that from May 1 to 10, when China has said the Olympic torch will be carried to the summit, no one will be allowed to climb up the south face, in Nepal, though apparently it has not yet clarified its new restrictions to tour operators planning expeditions.

Nepal's tourism minister, Prithvi Subba Gurung, said in a telephone interview on Thursday that the Chinese government had appealed to his administration to help prevent disruptions to the Olympic torch ceremony. "Expedition teams will not be allowed to ascend Mount Everest from the base camp" on the Nepal side, he said.

He went on to say that his ministry had also pressed tour operators to be extra vigilant of teams scheduled to climb even before May 1, allowing access only to climbers known to the operators.

Tour operators in Katmandu said by telephone on Friday that they had not been told of the government's plans. Dawa Sherpa, whose company, Asian Trekking, had organized at least four expeditions to Mount Everest for this spring, all on the Tibet face, said Friday evening that he was still trying to reorganize the treks to the Nepal side, but was in the dark about when the Nepalese authorities would allow them.

Timing is crucial, Mr. Sherpa said. It would be possible to start his clients on lower-altitude treks in early April and then climb to the summit, at 29,000 feet, just after May 10. Some mountaineers, he said, had already arrived in the country, only to be told that their expedition was in limbo.

Nepal's decision underscores its vulnerability to pressure from its large and powerful neighbor to the north, even if it involves forsaking lucrative earnings from expedition permits. The tourism industry is among Nepal's most important revenue streams, and the tourism ministry says permits to scale Everest put \$4 million into government coffers last year, a significant amount for one of Asia's poorest countries.

The Associated Press reported that the police scuffled Friday with about 1,000 protesters, including dozens of Buddhist monks, at a rally in Katmandu in support of demonstrators in Tibet. About 12 monks were injured.

China's plan to have the Olympic torch carried into Tibet over Everest has drawn protests from groups that advocate greater autonomy for Tibet and for monks in the Tibetan capital, Lhasa. In India, Tibetan exiles were arrested this week as they set off on foot from Dharamsala, seat of the Tibetan government in exile, with Lhasa as their destination. The march is one of several international protests related to Chinese rule in Tibet, and takes place around the anniversary of a failed uprising against Chinese control of Tibet in 1959.

In Dharamsala, Tibetans staged a candlelight vigil and circled the residence of the Dalai Lama on Friday night. "This is a spontaneous reaction in solidarity and safety of monks in Tibet and monks detained in Dehra," a participant, Dawa Lokyitsang, 23, said by telephone. "Everybody is holding a candle and chanting prayers."

In his annual speech to mark the anniversary of the failed Tibetan uprising, delivered last Monday, the Dalai Lama said he had endorsed China's serving as Olympic host and urged the international community to press Beijing to protect the rights and well-being of Tibetans.

Hari Kumar contributed reporting.