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Direct Flights between China and Taiwan Take Off for First Time in 56 Years

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Nonstop flights between China and Taiwan took off Saturday for the first time in more than half a century as part of a temporary plan to ease tensions across the Taiwan Strait.

Traditional dragon dancers in bright costumes performed on the tarmac as three airplanes prepared to leave Beijing's airport Saturday, the first to fly nonstop to Taiwan since 1949. The ceremony marked the first of 48 charter flights allowed to operate between Taiwan and the mainland over the Chinese Lunar New Year.

Taiwan banned direct flights after losing the Chinese civil war to the communists in 1949, citing concerns that China might use airliners to attack.

Taiwanese legislator John Chang spoke of the flights' significance at the ceremony.

Mr. Chang said that despite differences, the flights symbolize hope for peace and dialogue between China and Taiwan.

Thousands of people travel across the Taiwan Strait, but have previously had to change airplanes, usually in Hong Kong, something passengers complain is time-consuming and expensive.

Most of the passengers taking advantage of the nonstop flights, running until February 20, are Taiwanese businesspeople who work on the mainland.

Many Taiwanese have lobbied their government to ease its ban on direct air links, especially as trade continues to grow between the island and the mainland,

despite the political tensions. Chinese officials this month said cross-strait trade had reached a record \$70 billion in 2004.

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U.S. and Chinese military officials have met in Beijing for talks on building cooperation. the topic of Taiwan was high on the agenda. A delegation led by Richard Lawless, the U.S. deputy undersecretary of defense, met with Chinese military officials for what both sides described as a an "official policy dialogue." The talks started on Monday and touched on issues including counterterrorism, regional security, and rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait. China used the...



By **Luis Ramirez**

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