

18-member China trade delegation to arrive in Puerto Rico June 28

Local entrepreneur scores another first
As 22-week trade mission nets commitments

GABRIEL PARRA BLESSING

Call him Puerto Rico's answer to Marco Polo. José Ledesma, president of Far East-Puerto Rico Trade & Investment Group, has received a firm commitment from an 18-member Chinese trade delegation to come to the island June 28 before going to the mainland U.S. According to Ledesma, this represents an "historic and groundbreaking" event and will be the first time a delegation of any size has come to Puerto Rico from mainland China. The mission will be headed by Zhang Wei, vice chairman of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT) of the China Chamber of International Commerce.

Ledesma first established contact with the group during his 22-week trade mission to China last year (CB March 30), and he said being able to divert the delegation to come to Puerto Rico prior to its previously scheduled trip to the mainland U.S. represents an accomplishment on its own. "Since October 2004, I have established the first real indication of an opening up of trade between Puerto Rico and China—of business executives getting together as opposed to governments—would be precisely this kind of visit that is about to take place," said the young entrepreneur.

Calling it a "sneak preview" of things to come—he hopes to see this type of trip repeated at least once a year. Ledesma said he is in the process of gathering a group of business leaders from the Puerto Rico Chamber of Commerce (PRCC), which will cosponsor the event along with Ledesma's organization, to



Jose Ledesma, president of the Far East-Puerto Rico Trade & Investment Group, left, and Zhenge Zhao, deputy director general, department of international affairs of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, who will arrive in Puerto Rico June 28 as part of an 18-member Chinese trade delegation.

meet with the delegation for an all-day conference June 29. He said he would also be extending invitations to a select group of companies that may stand to profit from such an encounter. "It will be done on a first-come, first-serve basis," he explained, "but the companies will be carefully screened and selected to get the greatest amount of benefit from the gathering."

Although he maintained a government official would also be invited to attend—either Gov. Aníbal Acevedo Vilá or the secretaries of

State and Economic Development—he insisted this particular effort to promote trade between the island and the world's most populous nation would be led by the private sector throughout. "This is the perfect opportunity to empower private industry to act in its own best interest with the government acting at best as a facilitator and supporting organization. Instead of us spending perhaps hundreds of thousands of dollars in taxpayers' money to head a trade delegation to China, here they are coming to us," Ledesma stated.

Although the first half of what is being tentatively called the Puerto Rico-China Business & Investment Conference will constitute members of the Chinese mission and local business leaders giving a series of introductory speeches to get a feeling for one another's respective positions, the heart of the conference will be what Ledesma referred to as a match-making session. The international commerce equivalent of speed dating, Puerto Rico companies will be matched-up with their Chinese counterparts to establish official links and lay the groundwork for future business opportunities.

Besides Zhang Wei, the other 17 Chinese officials due to arrive on the island include businessmen from throughout China, representing a wide variety of industries. These include Wang Zaping from Anhui Investment Group Co., Xia Shixiang of the China Petroleum & Chemical Corp., Gao Yunshan of the Shanghai Fengle Seafood & Gas Station Limited Corp., Xie Huiling of the Hunan Haili-Century Real Estate Development Co. and Fan Zhimin of the Petro China Dalian Marine Shipping Co. ■