Chinese panda in Belgium 'probably' pregnant

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A photo taken on May 18, 2016 shows female giant panda Hao Hao, showing signs of pregnancy at the Pairi Daiza zoo in Belgium

A female panda on loan to Belgium from China is showing telling signs of pregnancy, the Pairi Daiza zoo said on Wednesday.

"At this stage, it is prudent to talk about a possible, even probable, arrival of a baby panda," the zoo said in a statement.

"If the pregnancy that seems on course is confirmed, the little one is expected by the early summer" but "could take place at any moment," the zoo added.

Hao Hao and the possible father-to-be Xing Hui have been in Belgium since February 2014, loaned on the occasion of a state visit to the kingdom by China's President Xi Jinping.

"For several weeks, she ate twice the usual amounts of bamboo," said Hao Hao's minder Tania Stroobant.

Hao Hao was artificially inseminated twice in February with the sperm of Xing Hui.

A panda birth in a zoo is rare. About 30 are brought to the world in captivity every year.

The two furry national treasures are on loan to Belgium for 15 years.

At their arrival in 2014, they unwittingly opened a new rift in the longtime turmoil dividing Belgium's rival Dutch- and French-speaking communities.

The problem is that the rare bears are in a zoo in French-speaking southern Wallonia.

The Pairi Daiza zoo has since seen its ticket sales boom, angering Belgium's oldest and best-known zoo, located in the port city of Antwerp.

There remain about 1,800 freely roaming pandas in the world, with about 400 in captivity, mainly in southwest China.