

Hong Kong mega bridge launch announcement sparks backlash

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The world's longest sea bridge will connect Hong Kong, Macau and mainland China

An opening ceremony has finally been announced for the world's longest sea bridge connecting Hong Kong, Macau and mainland China, but critics hit back Thursday over the secrecy surrounding the launch.

Construction started in 2009 on the 55-kilometre (34-mile) crossing, which includes a snaking road bridge and underwater tunnel, linking Hong Kong's Lantau island to the southern mainland Chinese city of Zhuhai and the gambling enclave of Macau, across the waters of the Pearl River Estuary.

It has been dogged by delays, budget overruns, corruption prosecutions and the deaths of construction workers.

While supporters promote it as an engineering marvel, others see the multi-billion dollar project as a costly white elephant designed to further integrate Hong Kong into the mainland at a time when Beijing is tightening its grip on the semi-autonomous city.

Local media received invites from Beijing's liaison office in Hong Kong Wednesday to an "opening ceremony" in Zhuhai on Tuesday, with no further details given.

China's President Xi Jinping is reported to be attending the event, but there has been no official confirmation whether the bridge will go into operation that day.

Hong Kong's transport department had no immediate answer Thursday when AFP asked whether it would be fully commissioned Tuesday.

Bus companies supposed to be operating on the bridge complained they were in the dark.

"At such short notice and without any details, how can we make the necessary logistic arrangements?" Eddie Choi, a spokesman for coach operator One Bus Hong Kong Macau, told the South China Morning Post.

An official from the mainland-based bridge authority told AFP the bridge would be "considered open" from Tuesday and confirmed there would be access that day to registered cars and buses, but did not elaborate.

Pro-democracy lawmaker Kwok Ka-ki who sits on the Hong Kong government's transport panel said he only learned of the launch ceremony from media reports Wednesday and had not received an invite to the opening.

But members of the transport panel have been invited to a bridge inspection Saturday, he said.

Kwok accused officials of secrecy and said there were still many unanswered questions.

"The bridge needs to be open and used by the public as soon as possible but whether it is safe and arrangements are properly in place and

conducted and tested we do not know," he told AFP.

He likened the lack of transparency to the launch last month of Hong Kong's new high-speed rail terminus, which saw Chinese security operating on the city's soil for the first time.

Mainland staff were brought into the station at a hush-hush midnight ceremony.

"Although Hong Kong people have paid a lot for the construction and have a substantial share in this [bridge](#), we have no control," said pro-democracy legislator Tanya Chan, also on the transport panel, who added that she had no idea what the opening ceremony Tuesday entailed.

"The Hong Kong government is always out of the picture and is under the control of the Chinese government," she said.

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