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China courts Africa in quest for commodities

Africa Editor **David White** looks at the diplomatic efforts by Beijing to feed its energy-hungry economy

Whether it should be called a long march or a safari, China's leaders are all bending their steps towards Africa.

The seven-country tour of Africa by Wen Jiabao, the Chinese premier, marks the third visit to the continent by a senior Chinese leader this year and demonstrates the extent of China's surging demand for the continent's natural resources.

Mr Wen is due today in Angola, now second only to Saudi Arabia as a source of imported oil for China's energy-hungry economy.

The unprecedented flurry of diplomatic activity began in January with a tour by Li Zhaoxing, foreign minister, and was followed in April by a high-profile trip by President Hu Jintao to Morocco, Nigeria and Kenya. Between them, the three men will have visited 15 African countries in six months, highlighting China's quest for oil and raw materials.

Although China pursued a political agenda in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, when it supported rebel movements in competition with the Soviet Union, it paid scant interest to the continent in the intervening years. Visits by top leaders were few and far between – until now.

Two-way trade between China and Africa soared by 35 per cent last year to \$39.7bn (£21.5bn), according to official Chinese statistics, a fourfold increase since 2001. China has overtaken Britain to become Africa's biggest commercial partner behind the US and France, in the most sudden change to the continent's international trading patterns since the end of the

are estimated to be involved in 900 investment projects on the continent.

Mr Wen, who began his trip in Egypt at the weekend, was yesterday in Ghana, where he promised a \$66m loan for telecommunications and other projects. The Ghanaians have hopes of getting Chinese finance for a \$600m hydroelectric dam.

Mr Wen was scheduled to arrive yesterday in oil-producing Congo-Brazzaville. He is due later this week in South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda.

In Angola, China's Sinopec was recently reported to have bought stakes in three more

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offshore oil areas alongside the Angolan state-owned Sonangol group in addition to its existing share in a BP-operated block.

In exchange for reliable crude supplies, China has made a \$3bn credit line available to repair Angola's war-ravaged infrastructure.

In Nigeria, Africa's biggest oil producer, China this year proposed \$4bn of investments to secure first refusal for China National Petroleum on four oil exploration licences. China's CNOOC offshore oil company recently paid \$2.7bn for a Nigerian oil block stake, in its largest overseas acquisition to

