

一觸即發

yi2 chu4 ji2 fa1

Five new electric public buses were taken back to the depot within days of being put on the road because their gates would pop open when they shouldn't have. The problem was discovered during an inspection. An expert said it was probably due to oversensitive sensors, which should not be too hard to fix.

The idiom “一觸即發” (*yi2 chu4 ji2 fa1*) comes to mind. “一” (*yi2*) is “one,” “觸” (*chu4*) “to touch,” “to contact,” “即” (*ji2*) “promptly,” “immediately,” and “發” (*fa1*) “to send out,” “to shoot out,” “to start.” Literally, “一觸即發” (*yi2 chu4 ji2 fa1*) is “one touch and off it goes.”

The literal meaning of this idiom is an exact description of the gate's problem - that it opens at a touch.

But “一觸即發” (*yi2 chu4 ji2 fa1*) is not usually used literally, but figuratively to describe vola-

Idiom by Lon Yan

tile situations. It means “to be triggered at any moment,” “to be on the verge of breaking out,” “to break out at any moment,” “to be ready to be set off at a touch.”

When hostility between two countries escalates to a dangerous level, we can say War is “一觸即發” (*yi2 chu4 ji2 fa1*) - War can be triggered any time!

The idiom also applies to other bad situations that are threatening to get worse. When negotiations with a union fails, we can say “A strike is “一觸即發” (*yi2 chu4 ji2 fa1*) - A strike can happen any time now!”

Terms containing the character “觸” (*chu4*) include:

觸犯 (*chu4 fan4*) - to offend

觸礁 (*chu4 jiao1*) - to run on a reef

感觸 (*gan3 chu4*) - to have a stirring of emotion

觸電 (*chu4 dian4*) - to get an electric shock