

Victims' families campaign for reassessment of Tiananmen Square massacre

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In China a wall of silence surrounds the Tiananmen Square massacre on June 4, 1989. Still recorded in official history as the suppression of a “counter-revolutionary rebellion,” references to it by political figures or by the state media are rare.

The tenth anniversary proved to be no exception. All acts of commemoration were prohibited on the mainland and up to 200 dissidents suspected of planning events were detained. The Square itself was sealed off for maintenance work. No retrospectives ran on the TV or in the newspapers. Satellite links to international media were disrupted.

When asked for his thoughts on the events of a decade ago, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji replied to journalists with the remark: “Thank you for reminding me. I had forgotten.”

However, the events impacted so profoundly upon Chinese society that they will not fade from memory. As in the cases of the victims of Pinochet in Chile, or the “Disappeared” in Argentina, the families of those who died have become one of the principal forces resisting the official silence.

During May a legal petition was submitted to the Supreme Peoples Procuratorate in Beijing by representatives of the June Fourth Victims' Network, a loose association of people across China who lost family or were personally wounded in 1989.

Publicised through international press releases last month and the web-site of the New York-based group Human Rights in China, the petition represents 105 people. They demand that a criminal investigation be conducted into the military crackdown and that charges be laid against those responsible. The petition specifically cites Li Peng, China's present prime minister, and suggests that posthumous indictments be laid against Deng Xiaoping.

It presents the cases of 155 people who died and 65 who were wounded and provides 27 detailed testimonies by people who were injured and family members of workers and students who were killed. The testimonies are the product of lengthy investigations by the families in the face of state intimidation.

The June Fourth Victims' Network was initiated by former university professor, Ding Zilin, whose 17-year-old son Jiang Jielian, a high school student, was killed on the night of June 3 while trying to block the advance of troops on Tiananmen Square.

In retaliation for telling US ABC News in 1991 how her son died, Ding Zilin was stripped of her Communist party membership and fired from her teaching position. She has regularly been placed under house arrest, particularly in the annual lead-up to the June 4 anniversary. The other families involved have also suffered state

persecution, including loss of employment and bans on holding public commemorations at the sites where their family members were killed.

The testimonies are both heart-wrenching and horrific, recounting the trauma of searching through morgues filled to capacity with the victims of the military and viewing the multiple gunshot and bayonet wounds inflicted on their loved ones.

The parents of Wu Guofeng, a 20-year-old student, describe how their son must have died:

“He was shot from the back of his head, and his shoulders, ribs and arms all had gunshot wounds. There was a bayonet wound about 7 to 8 centimeters below his bellybutton. It was obvious that he didn't die immediately after being hit by several bullets, then he was stabbed to death. Both his palms had deep cuts from bayonets. He must have tried to take away the bayonet and was cut. When we saw his body, the upper body was covered with blood. It was too horrible to see.”

The mother of Wu Xiangdong, a worker in a television factory, visited most of Beijing's hospitals on June 4 searching for her son. She describes the scenes on Chang'an Boulevard, a three-kilometre road leading to Tiananmen Square in the centre of Beijing that saw some of the heaviest clashes between troops and citizens on the night of June 3.

“By 5:00 a.m. on June 4, our son had still not returned. We decided to go by bicycle to look for him around Tiananmen. As we drew near, we saw a crowd of students: it was a tragic sight, as some were wounded and others were carrying those who had been crushed by tanks. Our hearts began to burn with fear but we could only get on our bikes and ride towards Xidan, where the sights were even more tragic and shocking. Chang'an Boulevard was streaked with blood; the remains of those crushed by tanks lay in heaps; the windows of the shops along the boulevard were shot out. On walls and windows everywhere people had written in blood, “Down with the Fascists!”....

“We went from hospital to hospital—the Children's Hospital, People's Hospital, Fuwai Hospital—at each entrance there were lists of the dead and wounded, long, densely-written lists with many names, perhaps 400, on each list. People crowded around, trying to find the names of missing relatives. We looked through many lists without finding our son's name, and also went into the hospitals to look for him among the unidentified corpses. It was pitiful, a blur of blood and flesh, young bodies with wild, staring eyes. But our son was not among them.”

Wu Xiangdong was finally found in Fuxing Hospital, killed by a bullet to the neck.

The widow of Xiao Bo, a chemistry lecturer at Beijing University, provides an insight into the conditions in the hospitals:

“Xiao died of a gunshot wound to the chest. The bullet severed his aorta, causing him to lose a lot of blood. Fuxing Hospital had not made preparations to provide emergency care for gunshot victims, so there wasn't enough blood for transfusions. The hospital had only prepared large quantities of eyedrops and gauze, thinking that, at worst, the troops would use tear gas to disperse the crowds. A significant number of victims died in the same way that Xiao did, because there was not enough blood.”

Other testimony reveals the attempts made by the Chinese authorities to conceal the true extent of the massacre.

The parents of Wang Nan, a 19-year-old student, recount in their testimony how he was severely wounded on Chang'an Boulevard and left to die in the street by advancing soldiers.

“After daybreak, the troops buried the dead on Chang'an Boulevard where they had died. Wang Nan and several others killed near him were buried west of the lawn in front of the No.28 High School to the west of Tiananmen (Since the lawn was destroyed, now bushes are grown there).

“Around June 7, because the bodies were buried not far from the surface, their clothes became visible above the surface after a torrential rain. They also began to smell. So the school reported the matter to the Xicheng District Public Security Bureau. The health bureau and the public security bureau jointly exhumed the bodies. Since all identification documents (or death certificates) had been taken away by the soldiers who buried the bodies, these became unidentified corpses.”

Wang Nan's body was not identified until June 16.

In the case of Xie Jingsuo, a 21-year-old student, his sister testifies that the authorities falsified his death certificate.

“On the morning of June 7, his school informed us that we should come to claim his body at the Emergency Center. There, we were told that Jingsuo had died on June 4. The death certificate indicated that death had resulted from serious heart failure. According to a driver in the Emergency Center, however, Jingsuo was killed by gunfire in the evening of June 3 and some people brought him to the Center. We still do not know exactly when and where the tragedy happened. Six wounds were visible on Jingsuo's body, in the chest and on the back. They are clearly visible on the photos. We couldn't tell whether they were wounds caused by bullets or marks left by batons. He had clearly been shot in the genitals. We never told our parents about the circumstances of his terrible death. We don't have the heart to add to their pain.”

Throughout the testimonies one theme continually re-emerges—passionate denunciations of the official version of the June 4 movement as criminal and counter-revolutionary.

The testimony written by the mother of Duan Changlong, a 24-year-old senior chemistry student, reads:

“Changlong did not die from disease or in a car accident, but for love of his country. He died in the belief that ‘everyone is responsible for the rise and fall of his own nation’. However, the people in power not only tried to shield their faults but also made slanderous accusations against innocent students and people,

calling their peaceful demonstrations ‘turmoil.’”

The demand of the families is for a reassessment of this verdict. It is likely that this would have wide support across China, especially in Beijing, where a considerable percentage of the population has a family member or friend who was killed, wounded or arrested.

The most reliable initial estimate of casualties inflicted by the military made by the Chinese Red Cross on June 6, was that over 2,600 people were killed and at least 7,000 were wounded.

Considering that the Red Cross figure was arrived at without knowledge of those whose death certificates were falsified, whose bodies were disposed of by the military or who died in hospitals over the following weeks, it lends support to those who claim the actual number of victims is far higher.

The wave of repression that swept China after June 4 engulfed masses of people, with over 40,000 arrests believed to have been made in June and July 1989 alone, accompanied by dozens of executions. Over 10,000 were expelled from the Communist Party in Beijing for alleged sympathy with the anti-government demands. University enrolments were halved in retaliation for the ferment on the campuses, causing tens of thousands of students to lose their right to study.

Official Chinese sources have recently admitted that nearly 2,000 people remain in prison, convicted of “counter-revolutionary crimes”. Many are believed to have been arrested during 1989. But that is only part of the picture.

A tenth anniversary report prepared by Amnesty International, entitled *Forgotten Prisoners*, names 241 individuals still in several Chinese prisons for their role in the 1989 movement. The majority are factory workers who were arrested in the first week following the massacre and are serving sentences ranging from 10 years to life. Most were convicted on dubious criminal charges such as hooliganism, arson, robbery and looting. Amnesty estimates that there are many others still imprisoned.

The petition of the families leaves no doubt as to the true assessment of the June 4 movement—the real criminals of 1989 are to be found in the Chinese government and the ruling Stalinist party.



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