A symptom of deep social tensions

Bomb blasts kill 108 in industrial city in China

Carol Divjak
5 April 2001

Just before dawn on March 16 four bomb blasts rocked the Chinese industrial city of Shijiazhuang about 200 kilometres southwest of Beijing.

The first exploded in a dormitory attached to the No.3 Cotton Factory and housing about 170 people. The building collapsed like a house of cards burying its residents. The second ripped through a four-storey dormitory near the No.1 Cotton Factory killing about 60 people. The third rocked a two-storey residence near the No.7 Cotton Factory and a fourth blast occurred at a residential building in Dianda Road.

According to officials, the explosions claimed the lives of at least 108 people but local hospital and residents put the death toll at closer to 200. All of the casualties were workers, who were employed at the cotton mills, or members of their families.

From the outset, authorities were anxious to prevent the bombings from becoming a focus for anti-government animosities or international attention. Police immediately cordoned off the city and began searching vehicles and carrying out identity checks. Several foreign reporters trying to enter the city were turned back.

Investigators quickly targeted one man—Jin Ruchao, a 41-year-old deaf mute previously accused of murdering his lover. No reason or evidence was given for making Jin the chief suspect. Nevertheless wanted posters went up throughout China and the biggest manhunt in 20 years took place. Jin was finally arrested in Beihai in the southern province of Guangxi.

According to police, Jin confessed to the crime although initially no motive was given for the bombings. Then after days in detention, he was said to have given a detailed account of how he single-handedly masterminded and carried out the bombings.

According to the state-run *People's Daily*, Jin placed the explosives in yellow bags marked “chicken feed” in the four workers' dormitories and then rushed between his targets by taxi to set off the blasts on the morning of March 16. He was apparently motivated by personal hostility towards people living in the dormitories.

However, the residents of the city are not convinced that Jin is the culprit. “Many people are saying ‘They've got a scapegoat,” a storeowner told *Agence France Presse*. A local businessman told the *New York Times*: “[T]he people haven't been given much information, and the explanation we have been given is hard to believe.”

A local official, who did not give his name, said that it was clear that more than one person had carried out the bombings and that the explosives had been planted with expertise. Moreover the explosions all occurred within an hour and the locations were at least 15 minutes drive from each other.

The official explanation is all the more remarkable when one considers that Jin is a deaf mute who can only communicate using pen and paper. There is no mention of police having gathered corroborative evidence from the taxi driver or taxi drivers who rushed him from one explosion to the next in the early hours of the morning—presumably without noticing anything suspicious.

Residents have good reason to be skeptical. The crude use of a scapegoat is a regular modus operandi for the authorities and police, keen to avoid public discussion or debate on any broader issues.

Only last September a series of small homemade bombs hit department stores and buses in the city

© World Socialist Web Site

injuring 28 people. Rumors linked the explosions to criminals battling for control of the public transport system. But the police picked up an unemployed man, claiming he was trying to extort money from the government. He was rapidly tried, found guilty and executed.

A prime example of scapegoating occurred only a fortnight ago when an explosion killed 42 young children in an elementary school in the village of Fanglin in the eastern province of Jiangxi. Officials immediately blamed a suicidal madman for the tragedy. But distraught parents insisted that the explosion had been caused by the work that the school children had been carrying out—assembling fireworks.

Inspite of the attempts of police and the bureaucratic apparatus—right up to Premier Zhu Rongji—to suppress the story, it became clear that schools throughout China are being forced to function as factories as a result of the lack of government finance. Faced with mounting public outrage, Rongji was eventually forced to issue a half-hearted apology, conceding that—in the past at least—the young children had been involved in the dangerous work of assembling fireworks.

Social tensions

The precise reasons for the explosions in Shijiazhuang are still not clear. Alternative explanations have been advanced. Local officials told the press that suspicion was also being directed against workers laid off from the cotton mills that used to account for 60 to 70 percent of the city's workforce. He did not explain, however, why unemployed workers would want to kill their own workmates as a means of protest. Again it smacks of an official cover-up—foisting the blame onto the victims of government policies.

Residents expressed the belief that the bombings were part of a terror campaign by crime gangs linked to the city's former mayor who is currently awaiting trial on charges of graft. Another rumour was that disgruntled ex-soldiers made jobless by recent sackings were responsible.

Whatever the immediate cause, it is striking that all the versions—including the one involving Jin—point to deeper underlying social tensions. Life in this industrial city has been torn apart by sackings, unemployment and growing poverty which, in the absence of a progressive alternative, is generating the disorientation and despair that fosters crime and corruption as well as depression, mental instability and desperate acts.

More than 50,000 workers in the city's factories have been put on “indefinite leave” since the middle 1990s as the city's 12 textile mills were restructured or closed down. Only four remain in operation. According to one report, residents estimate that one in three workers from state enterprises have been laid off or forced to take early retirement.

Factories are legally obliged to provide financial support to laid-off workers for three years, but often that does not take place and the money amounts to a fraction of their previous wages. Once that uncertain assistance runs out the government provides no welfare or unemployment benefits. The police suspect Jin had been discharged from his factory in 1983.

Shijiazhuang is a microcosm of what is taking place across China. Premier Zhu Rongji has been central to the restructuring of the textile industry, which has resulted in the melting down of nine million spindles and the loss of 1.4 million jobs. Tens of millions of workers have been sacked from other state enterprises over the past decade. Another 24 million workers, still nominally with jobs in state-owned factories, are effectively unemployed and receive little or no pay.

This is the social reality that Beijing and local authorities are responsible for, are seeking to cover up, and which will unfortunately produce further such tragedies.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site