

Gas explosion turns Chinese villages into “a death zone”

John Chan

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A toxic gas blowout at a drilling well in the municipality of Chongqing in south-west China on the night of December 23 has killed at least 233 people. More than 9,000 people have been treated for gas poisoning after inhaling hydrogen sulphide—also known as rotten egg gas. It causes skin burns, eye irritation and respiratory problems at low levels and is lethal at high concentrations.

Ill-equipped rescue teams were unable to reach the area for some 48 hours because of the danger posed by gas continuing to gush from the well. Poor communication and transport in the remote and mountainous region also hampered operations.

The *China Daily* newspaper described the tragedy as “the worst of its kind in China’s history”. “The poisonous gas hovering in the air made an area of 25 square kilometres a death zone, as many villagers were intoxicated by the fumes in their sleep,” it stated.

News agencies reported horrific scenes—people lying dead in villages and on roads, and the bodies of domestic animals littered around with white foam coming from their nostrils. Worst hit was the village of Xiaoyang—next to the gas well—where 90 percent of the residents were killed, including entire families. Many died in their sleep or were too old to escape.

Tang Xiaoying, who lived 300 metres from the well, told the *Chongqing Economic Times* that she lost nine family members, including her five-year-old daughter. She noticed the gas eruption when she was putting her two daughters to bed. She tried to escape with her children but one of them stopped breathing before they reached safety.

A 41-year-old survivor, Liao Yong, lived just 100 metres from the well. He told the *Chongqing Morning Post* that a dark mist of gas chased him as he fled in his farm vehicle with more than 20 people. After driving

several kilometres, he no longer smelt the gas and stopped his vehicle to look back. “But within minutes, Liao Yong again caught a whiff of the smell of stinky duck eggs... and hastily drove on,” the paper said.

More than 40,000 residents, most of them local farmers, had to be evacuated from the area around the gas well. But there appears to have been no emergency plan. The chaos was further exacerbated by a lack of transport and facilities. Villagers had to use whatever transport was available, including pickup trucks and wagons pulled by tractors. According to one report, a local merchant used his truck to make 20 trips to the gas-affected area to save 400 people.

The local hospitals and rural medical clinics lack the facilities to deal with large-scale emergencies and were rapidly inundated with thousands of cases of gas poisoning. Some evacuees were accommodated in 15 temporary shelters in schools and canteens, but many people still had to shelter in tents. Temperatures in the region drop as low as zero degrees Centigrade at night.

The escaping gas was only stopped on December 27 when workers wearing protective suits and respirators poured tonnes of mud and cement into the 400-metre deep well. Although some villagers began returning to their homes this week, many have to wait until their houses are cleared of the gas. There are also concerns that the gas may have contaminated water supplies and plants. The carcasses of thousands of dead animals had to be buried.

The exact cause of the tragedy is yet to be determined. But, according to initial reports, the gas eruption occurred at No 16 well in the Chuandongbei field after drilling punctured a pressurised store containing a mixture of hydrogen sulphide and natural gas.

The gas field is owned by the country’s largest state-

owned oil company, China National Petroleum Corporation, parent of PetroChina—a major stock-listed energy company. A PetroChina spokesman insisted: “This kind of blow-out is not unusual during oil and gas drilling. It was the sulphurated hydrogen that made this accident so fatal.” But it is unclear what, if any, precautions the company had taken to avert such a disaster.

The Hong Kong-based *Singtao Daily* cited sources in Chongqing City who declared that PetroChina only cared how much gas it was pumping to the provincial capital of Chengdu and had invested little in safety measures. There appeared to have been no monitoring system or alarm and no plan for an emergency evacuation in what is a heavily populated province.

Chongqing is a major natural gas production zone. PetroChina began constructing a \$US400 million pipeline from the municipality to central China in August. In Kai county where the accident occurred, there are 15 gas wells.

PetroChina’s operations are closely associated with the open market reforms that have seen billions of dollars of foreign investment flood into China. The company has been corporatised and is currently listed on international stock exchanges. Tens of thousands of former employees were laid off in 1990s as part of a massive corporate restructuring. Since China’s entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001, the company has had to face increased competition as major transnational oil companies have become involved in developing the country’s oil and gas fields.

China’s oil and gas industry is under great pressure to discover new sources of energy and to boost profits. There is a growing demand for power, which has contributed to the drive to open up new gas fields. It is estimated that China at present generates 10 percent less electricity than is needed—a huge shortfall of some 40 gigawatts. Beijing is pushing for “clean energy” from new power stations using gas to reduce reliance on the coal-fired stations that currently produce the vast majority of China’s power.

PetroChina and the government, at all levels, have been attempting to minimise the extent of the disaster and to cover up their own responsibility. State councillor Hua Jianmin, one of President Hu Jintao’s close protégés, was dispatched to the scene to conduct an investigation and to show Beijing’s concern for the

victims.

Huang Yi, a spokesman for the national industrial safety agency, told the media: “It was an accident of rare severity. We must learn a lesson from it.” According to official figures, there have been just two gas blowouts since 1992, and they killed a total of 17 people. It is unlikely, however, that anything will be done.

In recent years, the demands of the capitalist market and government inaction have combined to contribute to an appalling level of industrial accidents. According to official statistics, 120,890 people had been killed in workplace accidents in the past 11 months. The most recent occurred on December 30 when at least 29 workers were killed in an explosion at a fireworks factory in the northeast province of Liaoning.



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