

Beijing detains SARS doctor for raising questions about Tiananmen Square

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17 July 2004

A 72-year-old former military surgeon, Dr Jiang Yanyong, has been arrested in China and is currently being forced to undergo indoctrination. His alleged crime appears to be the “serious political mistake” of sending an open letter to the Chinese leadership in February demanding a reassessment of the June 4, 1989, Tiananmen Square massacre.

After several months of visits by party and military officials, as well as weekly “criticism meetings” at his workplace—No. 301 Military Hospital in Beijing—the doctor and his wife, Hua Zhongwei, were taken away on June 1 when they attempted to apply for a visa at the US embassy in Beijing. Prior to their arrest, the couple’s movements, phone calls and email had been under close police surveillance.

According to sources cited by the *Washington Post* on July 5, Jiang is now detained and under 24-hour surveillance at an undisclosed location in Beijing. He is forced to write daily statements of “self-criticism” and to watch videotapes related to the “June 4 events” to raise his “political understanding”. Jiang’s wife was eventually released on June 15, after her son and daughter gave interviews to the foreign press.

The doctor first came to public prominence last year. He received widespread media coverage in China after he wrote an email to *Time* magazine, providing details of the spread of SARS that punctured the official cover-up of the epidemic. While Jiang’s efforts eventually helped to curb the SARS crisis, they caused considerable embarrassment to the government. President Hu Jintao was compelled to sack the Health Minister and the Beijing mayor to quell public outrage over government inaction.

No move was made against him at the time, but Jiang was clearly a marked man. According to the *Washington Post*, top Chinese leaders decided in a meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee late last year to investigate the doctor in the name of maintaining “political stability”. Their concern was that the doctor’s actions would encourage public criticism of other government policies and further expose the Beijing bureaucracy’s lack of any significant base of support.

In February, Jiang directed a letter to the top Chinese Communist Party (CCP) bodies calling for an official reassessment of the Tiananmen Square massacre. The issue is an extremely sensitive one for the Stalinist leadership which ordered the cold-blooded murder of hundreds of unarmed protesters using tanks and heavily armed troops. They justified their actions as a necessary response to a “counter-revolutionary” rebellion.

Jiang’s detention—just days before the 15th anniversary of the June 4 events—was part of a police crackdown in Beijing and throughout China to ensure that there would be no protests to mark the occasion. Sections of the regime were, however, nervous about the public reaction to the arrest. An unnamed senior military official told the *Washington Post* that Jiang has broad support inside the Communist Party and that it would be increasingly difficult for the leadership to detain him as news of this arrest spread.

Jiang’s letter, which was leaked to the foreign press in March, contains a detailed account of his personal experiences as a head surgeon in a military hospital in Beijing. He witnessed first hand the slaughter of students and workers and described the situation as the worst he had encountered in his 30 years experience.

“I was totally lost after seeing the People’s Army using weapons given to it by the people, to shoot their own people, right here in the capital. Yet I did not have time to think—more intensive bursts of gunfire broke out and bloodstained people kept arriving, lying on wooden planks or tricycles, carried by the neighbouring residents. While I attended the wounded I also requested my coworkers to call all doctors and nurses in my department to get to the surgery rooms as soon as possible.

“There were 18 surgery rooms in my hospital and that night, we used every inch of them for rescue work. From 10 p.m. to midnight, our emergency unit admitted 89 people wounded by guns and seven later died. All night, doctors divided into three teams to operate on the patients in all the 18 surgery rooms, trying to rescue as many people as possible. Some victims remain in my memory and they will remain there forever.”

Jiang is a longstanding member of the Communist Party and his views reflect a layer of the bureaucracy that is seeking a cautious easing of the present police state restrictions as a means of dissipating the immense social tensions building up in the country. A reassessment of the Tiananmen Square massacre, which Jiang blames on individuals not the party’s policies, is a component of this agenda.

Pointing to the debate inside the Communist Party, he wrote in his letter: “The Party’s mistake must be corrected by the Party and sooner and more comprehensive it is, the better. I believe a reassessment of June 4 is supported by all people and will not affect China’s stability. The so-called ‘stability should come first’ idea, introduced after June 4 has in fact been making the situation worse. Every year when June 4 is approaching, certain people

would feel very uncomfortable, for they do not know how much power and effort they need to put into suppressing the people's dissatisfaction. The uneasiness has not gradually diminished just because June 4 incident has become farther and farther away. On the contrary, the people become increasingly disappointed and angry."

The two sides of the internal debate reflect the political dilemma confronting the Stalinist bureaucracy. Those like Jiang argue that a reassessment of the June 4 massacre and a more liberal form of rule, based on the emerging capitalist elite and middle class layers, are essential if the regime is not to be swept away by mounting dissatisfaction. They accuse their opponents of creating political instability through their blind insistence that "stability must come first".

However, the dominant factions in Beijing point to the 1989 massacre as the reason why no concessions can be made. They blame the "political reforms" promoted former party secretary Zhao Ziyang in 1989, with support of middle class and liberal intellectuals, for encouraging the students' occupation of Tiananmen Square to spiral out of control. They point to the fact that the demonstrations were drawing in layers of workers and the urban poor and taking on the character of a popular revolt.

The leadership, headed by former president Jiang Zemin, which came to power following the bloodbath is completely opposed to any "reassessment" of the events. From their experience, any loosening of social controls or democratic concessions would only lead to more demands and rapidly undermine the entire regime. Jiang Zemin's orientation was summed up in his "three represents" theory to legitimatise private property and allow the capitalist elite into the Communist party, while maintaining a tight police state control over the majority of the population.

These inner party differences are tactical in character. Both sides are preoccupied with shoring up an increasingly precarious regime and are terrified at the prospect of a working class rebellion. In the debate about "political reform", both sides are adamantly opposed to granting any genuine democratic rights to masses of ordinary working people.

Fifteen years after the crackdown, the social and political tensions that led to the protest movement have only sharpened. The massacre sent a signal to international capital that Beijing would use whatever means necessary to crush the opposition from workers. As a result, billions of dollars in investment flooded to the country.

Free market reforms have completely undermined the welfare measures that constituted the basis of Beijing's false claim to be "building socialism". To clear the way for private capital, large sections of state-run industry have been restructured or shut down altogether. The associated "iron rice bowl" that provided workers with guaranteed employment, healthcare, housing, free education and pensions has been destroyed.

The rising social discontent also extends to the countryside, which was the main social base for the regime after the victory of Mao Zedong's peasant armies in 1949. But the peasantry, which largely remained loyal to Beijing even through the worst years of famine and economic disaster, now constitute one of the most unstable and rebellious layers of the population. The vast majority

of small farmers have been hard hit by market reforms, heavy taxation and endemic corruption at all levels of government.

While unemployment has reached epidemic proportions in the old industrial regions, tens of millions of rural Chinese have been forced into sweatshops in the country's coastal areas. Not only do these workers confront unsafe conditions, long hours and low pay inside the factories, but as "migrant workers" in urban areas they lack the same basic rights and access to services as other residents.

These appalling social conditions have created a time bomb for which Beijing has no solution other than police repression. These methods, however, threaten to create unrest. As a result, various "liberals" and "democrats" argue that the regime needs a democratic face to help defuse the tensions and cultivate a social base among layers of the middle class.

Jiang's letter to the Chinese leadership is one of a number of indications of concern that time is running out. An editorial in the June issue of *Cheng Ming*, the Hong Kong-based journal of the "democracy movement", called on Beijing to reassess June 4 before it was too late. "History would not unlimitedly provide you such an opportunity. There are signs that people are losing patience," it declared.

The article cited the growing incidence of suicide protests and angry petitions by desperate laid-off workers. It pointed to a dissident essay circulated on the Internet calling for armed uprisings to "completely root out Communist Party's reactionary forces in China". It warned that Beijing's policy of repression was turning China's poor and oppressed towards "a violent revolution" and urged quick action before the program of "peaceful evolution" lost further ground.

"We always insist 'peaceful transformation', i.e., peacefully march to constitutional democracy through reform of political institutions. But this is dependent on positive interaction between the ruling party and opposition. If the regime closes its eyes and disregards the rest of the world, then things may change. If turmoil erupts as a result, the entire society is going to pay a severe price. This is a consequence no one wants to see."

These comments underline the common fear in the Beijing bureaucracy and amongst their "democratic" critics that a rebellion is brewing in China that threatens to sweep away not only the present autocratic regime but the system of capitalist exploitation it has fostered and encouraged for the last two decades.



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