

Chinese police crackdown on village protest over illicit land seizure

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In the early morning of July 31, some 600 Chinese police armed with tear gas, shotguns, dogs and electric batons mounted a major operation in the village of Shijiahe—part of Zhengzhou, the provincial capital of Henan. At least 30 villagers were injured, most of them wounded by rubber bullets. Four people were detained.

Zhengzhou city authorities have refused to comment on the incident and there has been virtually no media coverage in China. “We cannot make any comment, not because it is a secret [but because] we need time to clarify the facts,” a government spokesman said.

According to a message posted on the Internet by a villager, the police were originally looking for “a troublemaker”—the organiser of local protests against illegal land sales by the village head, Liu Guozhao. Before last week’s operation, unarmed villagers had confronted police, preventing them from taking away protest leaders.

Farmers strongly opposed the land sales, which involved about 150 hectares of farmland owned by more than 6,000 people and worth up to 40 million yuan (about \$US4.8 million). The unnamed villager said he evaded arrest in order to expose the incident on the Internet and to draw attention to the plight of the farmers.

According the *South China Morning Post*, villagers have been protesting since June. They have sent petitions to district and city authorities demanding action against the village head’s corruption, but received no response. Villagers were threatening to carry out another protest on July 31 when the security forces were sent in.

The *Washington Post* reported that the police officers entered the village around 2 a.m., in a convoy of more than 50 armoured vehicles. They seized a local doctor and his son after kicking in the door and smashing the windows of his home. “Neighbours said the noise woke them, and when they stepped out to investigate, police beat them back with truncheons and shouted at them to get back inside. But villagers realised police were trying to take away their representatives and poured into the streets...

“At one intersection, a crowd of more than 200 villagers

managed to surround and stop three armoured vehicles and a group of about 100 police officers, witnesses said. The police fired shots into the air, and when the crowd did not disperse, the officers used tear gas. The stunned villagers began backing off, but as they were retreating, the police began shooting into the crowd, witnesses said.”

A villager, Liu, whose mother was being treated in hospital after being shot, told the *South China Morning Post* that the district government sent 400 officials to the village to try to calm the situation and stop further petitions. “It was merely a show. They did not even bother to visit the other victims who were in other wards. They tried to give my mother 1,000 yuan for medical care, but we refused to accept it because we knew their real intention was to stop us from petitioning any further.”

Li Jie, a college student who returned to the village for a holiday, told the *Voice of America* that the vice mayor of Zhengzhou city had visited his family’s home. He urged them not participate in the petition and claimed that the village head had been arrested over corruption.

Li said land that peasants need for their living has been constantly stripped away from them by corrupt officials for industrial and urban development. He explained that other protests and petitions had been covered up by local authorities and, in some cases, suppressed by security forces. Li hoped the latest incident would awaken the Chinese leaders and public to the seriousness of rural problems.

The police operation in Shijiahe is one of few that have been reported. According to *Radio Free Asia*, police were also sent into the township of Humen in Dongguan city, in the southern Guangdong province, on June 30. Riot police armed with rifles and backed by nine armoured vehicles dispersed a crowd of hundreds of villagers who were protesting outside government offices over the transfer of their farmland.

These protests point to far broader processes. The frenetic pace of foreign investment in China and a speculative boom in real estate has created numerous opportunities for officials from provincial governments down to village committees to

cash in. In league with businessmen, these officials evict small farmers from their land using a variety of thuggish methods. The practice is particularly common in and around major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao announced a series of regulations in April to curb illegal land requisition as part of his “macroeconomic control” to cool the country’s economic activity. But the latest incident demonstrates that the measures are largely cosmetic.

Hu Xingdu, an economist at the Beijing Institute of Technology, told the *Los Angeles Times*: “Since peasants have no real ownership rights, they could never act as an equal at the negotiating table. The government owns the land, so almost any land reclamation can be justified in the name of public interest. Peasants have no choice but to back down.”

Since the de-collectivisation of the “Peoples Communes” in late 1970s—one of Beijing’s pro-market reforms—land has been leased to peasants for a 30-year period as a means of encouraging depressed agricultural production. But the policy, which the Chinese leadership claimed would end bureaucratic mismanagement, has proved to be just as much a dead-end for the majority of peasants.

While corrupt officials and rural businessmen have enriched themselves, the vast majority of rural people have been left in poverty. Tens of millions have been forced to find work in the cities where they end up as cheap labour in sweatshops, construction sites or even as prostitutes. Their oppressive conditions are often compared with those of the working class in nineteenth century England or the peonage labourers of Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s.

Henan province, where Shijiahe village is situated, is one of the poorest regions of China. In the 1990s, when the market price of products such as cotton was higher than the state purchase price, local government officials forced farmers to sell to them at the lower price. When the reverse was the case, the officials would suppress the state purchase price or even refuse to buy the produce.

Local governments resorted to such exploitative practices, as well as the imposition of a large number of taxes and fees, to make up for the lack of funding from the central government. An estimated 30 to 60 percent of local government budgets are needed just to finance education, which Beijing no longer funds.

Henan was one of the sites of another infamous economic activity. Driven by high debts and abject poverty, many small farmers sold their blood to local collection agencies as part of a government-sponsored campaign in early 1990s. But unsafe procedures, designed to save money and increase profits, resulted in the infection of hundreds of thousands of people with HIV, hepatitis B and other blood-transmitted

diseases.

Even though the Chinese leadership is deeply concerned over rural instability and ritually stresses the “urgency” of rural problems, it has little or no control over the market forces that it has unleashed. An article in the *Asia Times* on July 16, for instance, noted that in Taizhou city in the coastal Jiangsu province “Wen’s orders [on land sales] are blatantly flouted and ignored.”

According to the Ministry of Land Resources, over the past seven years, China has lost 66,670 square kilometres or about 6.7 million hectares in arable land for a variety of reasons, including to urban and industrial development. The loss is creating huge social pressures in a country where 800 million peasants are already struggling to survive. The government is even considering lease cropland in Vietnam to produce enough grain to feed the population.

According to the *Australian Financial Review* on August 5, food prices have skyrocketed in China due to the fourth consecutive year of falling grain production. In the second quarter of the year, wheat prices surged 38 percent, rice by 41 percent, cotton by 23 percent and oilseeds 22 percent. The rising cost of essential items is fuelling social tensions in the cities where workers are struggling on meagre wages.

Like former premier Zhu Rongji who thundered about “solving rural problems” in 1990s, Wen implemented rural tax cuts and farm subsidies at the National Peoples Congress in March to boost grain production and defuse rural discontent. But as Beijing implements its obligations under the World Trade Organisation for further economic restructuring and deregulation not only will these limited measures prove to be completely inadequate, but small farmers will be squeezed even harder from all sides—including the open plunder of their land.



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