

Peasant unrest continues in China

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A series of militant rural protests in China has revealed that peasants are being forced into increasingly desperate forms of rebellion to try to stem the destruction of their living standards. Far from creating “a harmonious society”, as claimed in March at the National Peoples Congress, Beijing’s free market policies are opening up deep social fissures and provoking social unrest.

On June 12, according to the Hong Kong-based *Sun Daily*, 1,000 villagers from Dacen, a village near Zhongshan in the southern province of Guangdong, clashed with about 1,000 riot police and police officers.

The protest was provoked by the unchecked corruption of local officials. Since the 1950s, the land and enterprises within the jurisdiction of a particular village or township have been the collective property of all its population. In a microcosm of what takes place across China, the government and party officials in Dacen have been treating the collective assets as their private property.

A local farmer told Radio Free Asia that officials had taken dividends of 130,000 yuan (\$US15,000) a year from the township’s firms, which make home appliances. The bulk of villagers were each paid a dividend of just 300 yuan (\$36) last year. “[That is] what the cadres get in one day,” the farmer pointed out.

Like many villages in Guangdong, the local officials have also been profiteering by selling communal land to developers for industrial and real estate use, and pocketing the money. The Dacen administration reportedly sold over 700 mu of land (46.6 hectares, 115.2 acres) last year, at the price of \$US19,000 per mu. In the course of village elections earlier this year, an investigation of village property found that some 100 million yuan (\$12 million) of “collective” assets was missing. Despite the lucrative land sales, the village had only three million yuan in its accounts.

Violence erupted when the township administration rejected a petition demanding the punishment of the officials responsible for the theft, and the return of the money. On June 8, villagers threw up barricades across two main roads, blocking all traffic in and out of the appliance factories. Local authorities mobilised police from across the area to break up the demonstration, resulting in the June 12 clash. At least a dozen villagers have been arrested.

What took place in Dacen—a community in one of the most

developed provinces of China as compared to the more backward inland areas—is just one example of bitter social conflict that has been reported in recent months. The driving force behind these tensions is the deepening polarisation between rich and poor.

In the early morning of June 11, a violent clash took place in northern Hebei province. Hundreds of hired thugs attacked a group of farmers in Shengyou village with hunting rifles, clubs and other weapons. Six farmers were killed and as many as 100 people were injured. Farmers from the village were guarding land that they refused to sell to the local Guohua power station.

Over the past two years, there have been repeated provocations. Local police began harassing the village and arresting its leaders. According to residents, attempts were made to surround the village and cut off water and food. At that point, the villagers established a 24-hour watch over the land. Two months ago, a group of about 20 thugs attacked the farmers who fought back. One of the thugs was captured and told a reporter that he had been promised \$12 to “teach a lesson” to the farmers.

Following the latest clash, the Shengyou villagers remain determined to defend their land despite the six deaths. The vicious character of the attack underscores the ruthlessness with which government authorities ride roughshod over any opposition to their policies.

On May 20, thousands of Tibetan farmers in western Qinghai province stormed and burnt down the government buildings of Zaduo County in protest against increased taxation.

According to the Hong Kong-based *Sintao Daily* on May 24, several hundred peasants from Ximen village, in Jiangxi province, blocked a Hong Kong to Beijing railway line—one of China’s main transportation arteries—for six hours. Villagers laid their bodies across the tracks, while others smashed the windows of the railway station in Jinggangshan. The protest caused shock in Beijing, as the area has considerable symbolic importance. It is where the peasant army of Mao Zedong established the first “rural Soviet” in the 1930s.

The farmers were protesting against the sale of land by the local government to real estate developers for a pittance. As a crowd of over 10,000 gathered in support of the blockade, authorities eventually sent in paramilitary police to disperse the peasants and allow two freight trains to proceed along the line.

The largest protest that has been reported took place on April

10 in Huaxi village, near the city of Dongyang in the eastern province of Zhejiang. More than 20,000 villagers confronted and drove off 3,000 police who had been sent in to break-up a protest against the pollution being caused by an industrial park.

The *Washington Post* published a detailed account of the background to the incident on June 13. In 2001, the city authorities in Dongyang opened the 33-hectare Zhuxi Industrial Park to house 13 factories, mainly producing chemicals and plastic products. Nearby villagers had opposed the plan from the outset due to their fears of pollution and the loss of 13 hectares of farmland.

Once production began, villagers immediately complained that gas emissions from the industrial park were causing eye irritations and other ailments. Effluents from the chemical plants also seeped into streams connected to local irrigation system and killed off crops.

The Huaxi villagers sent delegations to petition both the provincial government and the central government in Beijing, but no one would listen to their grievances, let alone act on them. In October 2001, 12 farmers were arrested and charged with breaking into the industrial park and attempting to sabotage one of the factories. A judge refused to hear any evidence of pollution and sentenced 10 of them to lengthy prison terms for “disturbing public order”.

On March 23 this year, after years of failed attempts to get some official recognition of their complaints, local villagers decided to establish a tent city outside the industrial park to disrupt its operations.

A manifesto issued by villagers on the Internet declared: “Compatriots, though we have no power, we want to survive and we want our human rights. We are for justice and we have been forced to act to win it. We are not guilty of any crime. Donate if you have money or take part if you have the energy. As long as we are united, our justified action will triumph over evil. The final victory will belong to the people.”

Two hundred elderly villagers occupied the tents, in the expectation that that the authorities would be reluctant to use force against old men and women. Police, however, were sent in just five days after the protest began to break it up. The tents were burnt down and several people detained. In response, thousands of angry villagers forced the police to withdraw and the tent city was re-established.

On the morning of April 10, some 3,000 police and state officials were bussed into the area to crush the opposition. Officers again stormed into the tents and began dragging out the people inside. As the authorities destroyed the tent city, villagers began to rally from throughout the area, drawn by firecrackers the protest leaders had established as a signal for a mass assembly.

With rumours spreading through the crowd that two elderly women had been killed, outraged villagers began hurling rocks and converging on riot police lines. Vastly outnumbered, hundreds of officers ran for their lives. Dozens of abandoned

police vehicles and buses and local officials’ cars were set ablaze. A Dongyang hospital official told a Hong Kong journal they had treated 140 people for injuries, most being police and government officials.

The *Washington Post* reported: “Some policemen shed their uniforms and ran away in their underwear, protesters recalled. Others fled into classrooms, they said, kicking in locked doors to find shelter.” One farmer said: “We saw the other face of the police. At first, the ordinary people had been afraid. But by then, it was the police who were afraid.”

In the aftermath of the protest, the villagers established a blockade of the industrial park and forced its closure. On May 12, over 10,000 villagers assembled when trucks attempted to break their picket. Confronted with the prospect of an entrenched rebellion, the Dongyang government ordered six factories to move out of the industrial park and appealed for an end to the protest. On May 20, the villagers took down their tents.

The *Washington Post* commented that the incident was “a rare triumph for the peasants, rising up against the all-powerful Communist Party government.... The workers and peasants appear to have nowhere else to turn but the street. Their representatives in parliament do what the government says; independent organisations are banned ... and party officials, focused on economic growth, have become partners of eager entrepreneurs rather than defenders of those abandoned by the boom.”

The success has however been shortlived. Unable to make even minimal concessions, Beijing’s response to any revolt has repeatedly been repression. The Dongyang city administration has already declared that it is carrying out investigations to identity the villagers’ leaders. Large numbers of plain-clothes agents and uniformed police have reportedly moved into the area, most likely in preparation for the reopening of the closed factories and a brutal crackdown on any opposition.



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