

Chinese police massacre protestors in Guangdong

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In a vicious attack on protesting farmers and fishermen in the southern province of Guangdong, Chinese paramilitary police opened fire with pistols and automatic rifles and killed at least four people during two nights of clashes on December 6 and 7. The bloody repression took place in Dongzhou, a community of 10,000 rural residents near Shanwei city.

Last weekend the Chinese government declared that three people were killed and five wounded. Amnesty International, however, confirmed the death of four and said up to six could have been killed. Hong Kong media outlets quoted villagers saying that 20 to 50 were killed. Dozens of residents are still missing.

It is the first reported incident since the Tiananmen Square massacre on June 4, 1989 that the Chinese security forces have shot down demonstrators. The action appears to have been planned from high levels of the government to terrorise not just the poor farmers, but millions of workers throughout Guangdong and China, by showing what they can expect if they take part in the country's growing protests.

The Dongzhou villagers were demonstrating against the lack of compensation for land confiscated by the government to build a power plant on a nearby hillside. Believing that local officials had stolen the compensation funds, farmers have staged protests outside the construction site since October. Local fishermen also charged that the project would spoil fishing in a lake.

The state-owned Guangdong Red Bay Generation is building the power plant as part of \$US700 million government project to supply electricity needs to the region's booming industrial and urban development.

An article in the *Washington Post* on December 8 provided a detailed account of the incidents. The violence erupted after three village leaders went to the plant in the afternoon of December 6 to lodge a complaint. They were detained by riot police on guard, and thousands of farmers

gathered outside the site demanding their release.

Police initially fired teargas to disperse the crowd but authorities soon sent 400-500 more paramilitary and riot police as reinforcements. These actions inflamed the situation, and thousands of villagers again confronted the police. Officials claimed that villagers used homemade explosives to attack the police, but according to other reports, only firecrackers were involved.

Whatever the situation was, the ensuing police action can only be described as a massacre.

The *Washington Post* reported: "This time, according to a villager who heard and saw what happened, police responded to the launching of explosives by firing repeatedly 'very rapid bursts of gunfire' over a period of several hours Tuesday and Wednesday nights. Some villagers reported seeing the People's Armed Police carry AK-47 assault rifles, one of the Chinese military's standard-issue weapons." Another witness said: "The police kept on shooting until they drove away all the villagers."

In one particularly brutal episode, armed police chased six men who attempted to escape from the violence by climbing a nearby hill. Five villagers were killed. The survivor, who was wounded in the leg, told a witness cited in the *New York Times* on December 10 that they were first shot from afar. Then, at close range, the police killed those who were wounded and unable to move.

Similar clashes occurred the next evening on the village's main road. A villager, Liu Yujing, said his younger brother was hit by two rounds of bullets, one in heart and one in the bladder. He died before getting into hospital.

After the two nights of shootings, the area was sealed off by hundreds of police officers armed with submachine guns. The families of some victims were unable to retrieve the bodies lying in the streets. One witness cited by the *Washington Post* said: "I saw the bodies lying

there. The family members were afraid to go and get them”.

A villager surnamed Chang quoted in the *New York Times* said he saw three bodies in a local clinic and more on the scene of the clashes: “I went there and saw seven or eight bodies lying there in a row, surrounded by many policemen, who were denying the families’ attempts to claim the bodies.” Another witness, Li, said the police were trying to move the bodies elsewhere: “Some corpses were just burned in the crossroads of the village, without allowing people to get close to see.” Others said they saw 13 bodies being thrown into the sea.

A villager surnamed Wei told Canada’s *Globe and Mail* in a telephone interview on December 11: “We are desperate. Some of us keep crying. We don’t know what to do next. The houses of our leaders were sealed today, and an increasing number of people are being arrested and taken away. Nobody dares to lead us now. There are rumours that tanks will come to flatten our village ... please save us.”

Local farmers have compared the massacre with the wartime atrocities of the Japanese army in China during the 1930s and 1940s and with Chiang Kai-shek’s brutal dictatorship before the 1949 revolution.

After attempting to suppress news of the incident, the state-run media was compelled to respond because of reports spread on Chinese web sites and by Hong Kong and foreign media. The official Xinhua newsagency claimed that 170 people led by “troublemakers” attempted to attack the power plant with knives, bottles of petroleum and fishing detonators. “It became dark when the chaotic mob began to throw explosives at the police. Police were forced to open fire in alarm,” Xinhua reported.

In the face of growing public anger, the Chinese government announced it had detained a police commander who directly ordered the shooting. The commander was not identified, however, and state media defended the officer, saying the decision to open fire was made “under particularly urgent circumstances”.

The large-scale operations involved, from the shooting to the media manipulation, clearly show that the response was organised within the government’s upper echelons. One local Communist Party official toured the area last Saturday and used a megaphone to denounce the villagers as “barbaric”. “We were forced to open fire,” he declared.

Amnesty International has demanded an investigation. Catherine Baber, an Amnesty director, called the killings “chilling”. She added: “The increasing number of such

disputes over land use across rural China, and the use of force to resolve them, suggest an urgent need for the Chinese authorities to focus on developing effective channels for dispute resolution.”

Behind the land disputes lies the growing market demand for development sites. Beijing has designated the Dongzhou power plant as a national level project and the parent company, the Guangdong Yuedian Group, is controlled by the provincial government.

In order to attract foreign capital, the Chinese authorities abuse the state-ownership of land to build infrastructure and industrial projects on sites occupied by farmers. This has fuelled a wave of protests, particularly in Guangdong province—China’s main export zone. Last year, 74,000 protests and riots were recorded, involving over 3.7 million people.

In addition, the government is concerned that mainland workers and farmers will follow the example of a recent mass protest in nearby Hong Kong against the territory’s Beijing-backed new chief executive.

Deeper social tensions are building as well. An International Conference of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) study released on December 8 before the World Trade Organisation (WTO) ministerial meeting in Hong Kong, described China as rapidly becoming “the sweatshop of the world”.

The study pointed out that only a small layer of private capitalists and middle class professionals had benefited from China’s entry into the WTO. About 250 million Chinese were living on less than \$1 a day, and 700 million or 47 percent of the population lived on less than \$2 a day. Consequently, “the people who provide everything from T-shirts to DVD players to the world’s consumers often have 60-70 hour working weeks, live in dormitories with eight to 16 people in each room, earn less than the minimum wages that go as low as \$44 per month, and have unemployment as the only prospect if they should get injured in the factories.”

The massacre in Dongzhou also served to send a message to the WTO ministers gathering in Hong Kong and to foreign investors that Beijing will not hesitate to use the most brutal methods to suppress working class unrest—just it did in Tiananmen Square 16 years ago.



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