

Beijing prepares the army to repress domestic unrest

John Chan**5 December 2006**

The Chinese government issued a new emergency response plan in mid-November, allowing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to directly intervene to suppress protests of workers and peasants. The plan indicates that preparations are being made to use the army for such purposes for the first time since the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989.

The Central Military Commission headed by President Hu Jintao approved the plan, which allows PLA officers at the regimental level to report directly to provincial and even regional authorities in an emergency, without the authorisation of divisional commanders. Five types of emergency are indicated: small-scale military conflicts, social instability, terrorist attacks, natural disasters and other public security crises.

An unnamed military source told the Xinhua news agency the new plan "will improve the effectiveness of our military bodies in facing emergencies involving national sovereignty and the safety of life and property". The source also indicated the plan stipulated that the army release timely information to "avoid panic due to rumours and irresponsible reporting".

Why does the PLA need an emergency response plan to protect "life and property"? Earlier this year, the Chinese cabinet or State Council already established a national response plan to cope with various crises. The armed forces have regularly assisted local governments in cases of natural disaster such as earthquakes or floods.

The real purpose of the new measure is to protect the "life and property" of the country's political and business elite from widespread popular hostility over corruption, injustice, unemployment and poverty. The *Australian* noted that the plan "provides a framework for the army to be deployed in domestic conflict,

despite Mr. Hu's declared new focus on building a harmonious society".

The police are increasingly unable to cope with the growing number of protests and demonstrations, which reached 87,000 last year. Fang Jue, a US-based Chinese dissident, told the *Australian*: "Public security affairs should be dealt with by the police and armed police, it is not the proper task of the army. But because mass protests are increasing, there are not enough police and armed police to deal with them."

In 1990s, the Chinese leadership used only the police and the paramilitary People's Armed Police to deal with protests. During that period, amid fears over a potential conflict with the US over Taiwan or with a re-armed Japan, Beijing wanted the army oriented to external challenges.

There were also concerns about the loyalty of the troops who would be ordered to suppress demonstrators. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership learnt a lesson in 1989 when fresh troops had to be brought in from remote provinces to break up the Tiananmen Square demonstrations by workers and students.

Since then, the CCP's support among poor peasants has been undermined by the impact of two decades of market reform that has deepened rural poverty and forced millions to migrate to the cities in search of work.

Nevertheless, the peasant-based PLA remains the cornerstone of the Stalinist regime in Beijing. A *People's Liberation Army Daily* editorial on November 16 confirmed that its No.1 task in dealing with "non-traditional threats" was to "safeguard social stability, deter and smash subversion and sabotage of hostile forces, and uphold the lasting political stability..."

In October, the state-run *China Daily* noted that

unprecedented “emergency response” measures were being implemented in Beijing to ensure the security of 2008 Olympic Games. The 29 types of emergencies listed included not only natural disasters and outbreak of endemic diseases, but clashes “such as between migrant workers and employers who delay or arbitrarily reduce payments”.

The security forces and disaster relief teams have established 13 “command headquarters” in the Chinese capital. According to Beijing’s Bureau of Public Security, over 260,000 hidden cameras have been installed in financial institutions, schools, hotels and residential districts to create a comprehensive, centralised surveillance network over the city’s 15 million people.

All these security measures reflect the CCP’s deep fears of unrest among the working class and rural poor created by the widening gap between rich and poor.

In November, the World Bank’s chief economist on China, Bert Hofman, issued a preliminary study showing that real income for China’s poorest 10 percent, or some 130 million people, had fallen by 2.5 percent from 2001 to 2003, despite growth rates of 10 percent.

These people are living on a \$US1 a day or less. The cause of poverty in many cases was illness, job loss or the confiscation of land compounded by the lack of any significant social security, including health care insurance or unemployment benefits. Another 470 million Chinese are living on \$2 a day or less.

Hofman told the *Financial Times*: “Our analysis suggests that a considerable number of people below the poverty line were hit by an income shock—they only kept up consumption by spending their savings.” He said his findings rejected the theory of the “rising tide lifts all boats”. Rather China’s rapid economic growth had benefitted only a small wealthy elite at expense of the vast majority of the population.

An article entitled, “In China, Growth at Whose Cost?” in the *Wall Street Journal* on November 22 warned that for the CCP regime, “which has staked its legitimacy almost entirely on its ability to make people richer, evidence that incomes are falling could be devastating.” It noted that the Gini coefficient for China, a measure of income inequality, had risen from 0.3 percent in 1980 to 0.4 percent last year—“a level of inequality similar to that of the unabashedly capitalist

US”.

The mouthpiece of the US financial elite is no more concerned about the plight of the Chinese poor, than it is about the millions of impoverished Americans. Its chief concern is how political and social instability in China will impact on the profits of US corporations, which have tens of billions of dollars invested.



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