

Chinese leaders react nervously to ongoing “snow havoc”

John Chan**8 February 2008**

The chaos and dislocation produced by China's worst snowstorms in decades is continuing despite the lifting on Wednesday of a severe weather warning that has been in place since January 25. Millions of migrant workers have been forced to cancel their annual lunar new year trip home to visit their families. Millions more are without power in sub-zero conditions.

According to official statistics, the snowstorms have caused at least \$7.5 billion worth of damage, with 223,000 houses destroyed and another 862,000 damaged. The latest death toll has risen to 80. But the situation is likely to be much worse. The clearest indication of the extent of the crisis is the flurry of activity by top Chinese leaders who are desperate to prevent anger and frustration from boiling over into anti-government protests over their mishandling of power blackouts, transport chaos and rising prices.

President Hu Jintao held another emergency meeting of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Politburo—the second in a week—and has launched a carefully-managed PR campaign to put the best possible face on the “snow havoc”. Hu personally inspected several provinces and joined local relief work—in front of television cameras. In all, eight of the nine members of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee—the party's top leadership body—have been touring the country. Even the remaining committee member, National People's Congress president Wu Bangguo, who was sick, has visited a power company and railway command centre in Beijing, to show his concern.

The busiest has been Premier Wen Jiabao. Last Sunday, he went to one of the worst-hit areas, Chenzhou in Hunan province, where half of the city's 4.5 million people have been without power for more than two weeks. Resentment in Chenzhou is rising as people huddle in their homes in temperatures as low as minus 8 degrees Celsius. Prices for candles, coal bricks and gas canisters soared. Long queues

formed for water and petrol. Automatic teller machines did not work.

Few people believe the optimistic official predictions on the restoration of power. One man told the *Guardian* newspaper: “If you report on this situation, please make sure you have the true facts. Premier Wen Jiabao came and said it would be solved, so officials here said that 80 percent of power was back up. That's obviously not true. Look around you. The only lights are from people's generators. At home we hardly have enough water even for cooking.”

The state broadcaster CCTV claimed that power had been reconnected early Wednesday in Chenzhou, but the situation remained unclear. In south-western Guizhou province, the BBC reported officials as saying it could take nearly five months to fully mend the power grid there. The Xinhua newsagency announced on Wednesday that the air force had transported 100 tonnes of candles to the cities of Guiyang, Changsha and Nanchang where people were still without power.

In factory dormitories along China's coastal regions, millions of workers have had to abandon travel plans. Agence France Presse (AFP) reported that as many as 12 million of the 30 million migrant workers in Guangdong province could not get tickets. The lunar new year is the only time that around 200 million rural migrants are able to travel home—the largest annual movement of people in the world. For the rest of the year, wives and husbands are separated; children do not see their parents.

The state media, however, has not shown scenes of huge crowds of tired and frustrated workers at railway stations trying to get home. News stories have shown “heroic” relief workers and soldiers, and the smiling faces of passengers appreciative of the small relief packages handed out by authorities. Senior CCP figures have expressed their concern for the masses and appealed to the public to have “faith” in Beijing's eventual victory in the

“war on the snow havoc”. As part of its new year’s eve extravaganza on Wednesday night, CCTV broadcast a group of celebrities cheerily declaring: “We are all a big family. Come on, let’s fight this.”

There is, however, a vast social gulf between the narrow privileged wealthy strata to which the CCP leaders and TV celebrities belong, and the hundreds of millions of workers who work long hours in difficult and often dangerous conditions on low pay to support their families. As Beijing is well aware, it is sitting on top of a social explosion waiting to happen.

The CCP’s response to the “snow havoc” points to the depth of the crisis. The *Asia Times* website noted that it was the first time since “Cultural Revolution” in 1960s that so many senior party leaders were out of Beijing at the same time. Such a mobilisation did not happen during the epidemic of the deadly SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) virus in 2003 or the huge floods of the Yangtze River in 1998.

Following the lead from Beijing, 11 provincial party bosses immediately appeared at the frontline of the relief effort. The Chinese government has mobilised 300,000 soldiers, 1.1 million army reservists and 1 million police to help in the relief work—and also to prevent any outbreak of protests. Local authorities worked hard to pressure millions of workers to abandon their holiday plans.

Scott Kronick, president of a public relations firm that has advised Beijing on crisis management, told the *Los Angeles Times* on February 4 that the Chinese government “is driven by a desire to maintain order amid fears things could develop into chaos”. His firm schooled the CCP leadership using Hurricane Katrina disaster as a case study. It is not surprising given that Premier Wen’s reassurances are just as empty and contemptuous of Chinese workers as those of US President Bush towards working people in New Orleans.

One Yew-kim, a professor at Chinese University of Hong Kong, commented to the *Los Angeles Times*: “Chinese leaders are very aware of the latent threat behind this crisis. And Premier Wen Jiabao, who puts a lot of emphasis on history and culture, certainly thinks about this when dealing with this crisis. As we know, there is a life cycle for every dynasty.”

David Zweig, a China specialist at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, told the *Chicago Tribune* that the real problem was not the natural disasters as such. “But I think the danger here is that common Chinese see that all the massive investment and growth of

the past 20 years has not gone where it can help common members of society—that is, improving transportation.”

The 200 million migrant workers from across rural China are among the most oppressed layers of the working class. They lack permanent residential permits, suffer discrimination and have no access to basic services in the cities where they work. Their only purpose is to provide profits for the corporations and sweatshops that exploit them. Their comfort and safety, let alone adequate transport home during the annual “spring rush”, is the last consideration.

Their plight is illustrated by a report in the *Guardian* on February 5 of a 45-year-old wool factory worker Zhao Baoqin, who was pushed from a bridge in the crush to get to Guangzhou railway station last Saturday. She is unconscious in a hospital bed, but according to her friends, the hospital authorities are demanding 80,000 yuan—eight times her annual wage—to treat her. Wei Erling, a taxi driver, told the newspaper that other people have donated money to help, but only 27,000 yuan. “If we don’t get enough money, we will probably have to give her up,” he said.

Wei added: “She’s lived a very simple life; she’s never had luxurious food or clothes, because she wanted to support her daughter. Of course, if she was someone ‘important’, people would pay more attention to what happened. The government and railway are taking no responsibility”. Zhao’s tragic fate is symptomatic of the terrible conditions of daily life facing millions of workers in China.

The Associated Press observed last week: “In Guangzhou, the transport crisis showed the toughness of the migrant workers and their high threshold for boredom—traits that make them excellent workers in factories that have lured away millions of jobs from the rest of the world. Most of them slept outside or on the floors of schools and convention centres as they waited patiently for the trains to run again. So far, there have been no reports of riots.”

But as ruling circles in China and internationally are well aware, patience can run out. That is the reason for the unprecedented CCP media campaign to prevent the “snow havoc” becoming the trigger for broader social discontent.



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