

As death toll climbs, Chinese earthquake exposes deep social divide

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The major earthquake that hit China's Sichuan province on May 12 is a huge human tragedy. The official death toll is now almost 15,000 and is expected to rise. At least 26,000 people are believed to be buried in the debris and many of those may be dead. According to estimates from Premier Wen Jiabao's working meeting yesterday, the affected area is 65,000 square kilometres, with 6 cities and 44 counties. Half the 20 million residents in the area have been directly affected by the earthquake.

Although Chinese troops and armed police have begun to reach the most isolated areas, including the town of Wenchuan at the epicentre, severe weather and damaged roads have prevented the transport of bulldozers and other heavy equipment. Wen has ordered parachute drops into the worst-affected counties and the deployment of 90 more helicopters. So far, the aid supplied by 20 helicopters has been insufficient. The number of soldiers mobilised has increased to 100,000. However, time is running out as soldiers and civilians use primitive tools and their bare hands to try to locate and extricate trapped victims.

TV footage has shown the flattened town of Yingxiu, which has been virtually wiped off the map. Rescuers found only 2,300 people alive—out of a population of 10,000. Half the survivors are seriously injured. Apart from the difficulties facing the rescue effort, tens of thousands of homeless people lack shelter and emergency supplies. Yesterday afternoon, the Mianyang city government ordered 700,000 residents to evacuate all buildings after warnings of a sizeable aftershock.

The Associated Press reported: "Homeless victims begged for aid on roadsides, and people settled in for a third night in a growing sprawl of refugee camps littered with garbage. In Hanwang, a town in one of the hardest-hit counties, survivors stood hoping for handouts from cars, jostling with each other to reach one vehicle where a passenger handed bottled water out the window."

Hanwang Hospital, a seven-storey building, collapsed. The surviving medical staff set up in a tyre factory driveway to provide basic care. Zhao Xiaoli, a 25-year-old nurse, told the

Associated Press: "I'm numb. The first day, hundreds of kids died when a school collapsed. The rest who came in had serious injuries. There was so little we could do for them."

There has been an outpouring of sympathy throughout China and internationally, and offers of assistance for the earthquake victims. Ordinary working people in many Chinese cities have lined up to donate blood or money to assist the survivors.

Although the earthquake is a natural disaster, the extent of the destruction and death has exposed the monstrous reality of an irrational social order that puts private profit ahead of the safety and well being of people. Anger is mounting at the shoddy character of the buildings in the impoverished towns and villages and the stark inequality between rich and poor.

Many schools and hospitals were flattened in Sichuan. The death of school children has focussed resentment on "tofu" buildings—substandard constructions that look good on the outside but are like soybean curd on the inside. Limited safety regulations are often subverted by corrupt collusion between developers and government officials. An online comment cited in the *Los Angeles Times* yesterday asked: "Why did so many schools collapse but all the government buildings were fine? It's outrageous!"

Dr. Tian has been treating the injured from Juyuan Middle School in Dujiangyan city, where collapsed buildings buried 900 students. He told today's *Australian* newspaper: "It's nothing but corruption—they must have used substandard cement and steel...The morgue is full of children's bodies. It's hell on earth."

A teacher who was lucky to escape explained: "The school has been sending requests, at least since 2000, to the local government asking for it to rebuild more safely, but it took no action." Another staff member said: "They [the two main buildings] were constructed from prefabricated cement boards that were inserted between steel poles to create walls. They were very fragile compared with concrete walls made of cement poured on site."

By contrast, major transnational and Chinese corporations operating in Sichuan have survived largely intact, except for

mining operations and power supplies. Japanese plants in Chengdu, such as the Toyota auto factory and the Yamaha electronic components facility, have been shut for the safety concerns, but suffered little damage. US operations, including the Intel assembly plant, did the same. Wal-Mart closed three stores. Microsoft and Motorola reported minor damage. China's largest rice cake manufacturer, Want Want China Holdings, shut seven plants, but none were damaged.

The presence of these well-known corporations in Sichuan demonstrates the growing penetration of foreign capital into China's inland regions, although the investments are still relatively small compared to coastal regions. Building codes have been enforced to protect the property of large investors, while other constructions have been ignored.

William Gormley, a former China manager of the US-based aircraft engine manufacturer Pratt & Whitney, told the *Los Angeles Times* that when its joint venture was built in Chengdu in 1996, Chinese officials insisted that the size of the piers was doubled and the foundations dug deeper to meet the seismic codes. As a result, the factory withstood Monday's earthquake. Gormley, who is still working in Chengdu as a business consultant, added that there were lots of "unregulated" buildings in Sichuan. "You don't find out how many until a tragedy like this happens," he said.

The *Wall Street Journal* yesterday contrasted the new high-rise buildings and office towers in Chengdu, equipped with anti-quake technology, with the flattened towns and villages. "Despite the recent growth of these outlying areas, the imbalance persists, as the rich get richer and the poor struggle to make ends meet. There is so little work in many of Sichuan's rural areas that it is one of China's biggest sources of migrant labour."

The newspaper said the massive migration of rural labour into urban areas—15 million people every year—has created the world's largest construction zone. China built 1.8 billion square metres of property in 2006 and another 4.1 billion square metres are under construction. Thousands of little-known towns and cities have sprouted up, but many buildings have been built cheaply and quickly, with little concern for safety. Construction in Sichuan ranked fifth among China's provinces in 2006, with almost twice as much property completed as in Beijing.

Poor planning and corruption associated with frenzied, often speculative construction has had other consequences. The Chinese government is relieved that the Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest, has no reported damage. However, according to the Ministry of Water Resources, 391 mainly small dams have suffered quake damage that could produce more disasters.

Some 2,000 troops have been sent to the two-year-old Zipingpu Dam in Sichuan, where cracks have appeared,

threatening downstream communities, including the city of Dujiangyan. During a government meeting in 2000, seismologists opposed the plan to build the dam as it is close to a known fault line. However, as with other infrastructure projects, the overriding preoccupation of Chinese authorities was to rush to provide power for rapidly expanding industry.

The Chinese government has been attempting to present a humane image, appealing to the broadly felt shock and sympathy. Premier Wen has been at the heart of this carefully managed PR operation. He has toured the worst-hit areas and spoken of the need for a "united" effort behind the Communist Party leadership. He wept before the cameras. He slipped due to the rain on May 13, but stoically refused to be treated by medical staff. Authorities have even scaled back the Olympic torch relay inside China so as to not appear indifferent.

In the age of the Internet, the Chinese leaders are aware that the old methods of blanket censorship are not effective. A similar PR operation took place in February when anger threatened to erupt over the "snow havoc" that left millions of rail passengers stranded and many areas without power. Senior Politburo members were dispatched to all affected areas to make a show of concern. In the midst of the crisis, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the Chinese leadership had employed a US public relations firm to provide top-level schooling in crisis management.

So far, the latest campaign appears to be working. The *New York Times* noted: "Commentary on Chinese Web sites and in chat rooms has been full of praise for the government's emergency response. On Tianya, a popular forum where antigovernment postings sometimes find a home, users have been quick to shout down those who criticise Mr. Wen and the military's delay in reaching some quake victims. 'Those who can only do mouth work please shut up at this key moment,' says one posting."

The Beijing bureaucracy, however, is concerned that the mood could change if stories of incompetence, corruption and callous indifference for the suffering of victims begin to emerge. The propaganda bosses have issued an instruction to the state media to report developments "positively". The massive deployment of troops is not just for rescue efforts, but to prevent any protests breaking out.



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