

# China's earthquake: The most destructive in modern history

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A week after the May 12 earthquake in Sichuan province, the Chinese government has declared three days of national mourning, beginning today, for those who lost their lives in the disaster. The mourning period is the longest since the death of Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in 1997. For three days, all national flags will fly at half-mast and all public recreational activities, including the Olympic torch relay, will be suspended.

Yesterday, Chinese authorities revised the earthquake's magnitude from the initial 7.8 up to 8 on the Richter scale. Premier Wen Jiabao has declared that the destruction caused by the earthquake was the most severe in the entire 60-year history of Peoples Republic of China. The Tangshan quake in 1976 killed up to 300,000 people, but its impact was largely restricted to one city. In Sichuan, an estimated 10 million people have been affected over a huge area.

The confirmed death toll has risen to more than 32,000 and is expected to reach or even surpass the official estimate of 50,000 deaths. More than 220,000 people have been injured. At least 3 million homes have been destroyed and another 12 million damaged. Some 130,000 Chinese troops have been deployed in rescue and relief efforts along with civilian emergency workers. Russia, Japan, Singapore and South Korea, as well as Taiwan and Hong Kong, have sent small rescue teams.

China has accepted \$1.6 million in US aid. Two US C-17 cargo planes arrived in China yesterday carrying relief supplies. At the same time, Beijing has refused to allow American and British teams in the quake region. While no official reason has been stated, Sichuan houses sensitive nuclear weapon industries and other military projects.

The Chinese military has confirmed that none of its nuclear facilities were damaged. According to the French Institute for Radiological Protection and Nuclear Safety, two nuclear fuel production sites, two nuclear weapons

sites and a research reactor are within a 145-kilometre radius from the epicentre. China's anti-satellite missile test in January 2007 was launched from the Xichang space centre in Sichuan. These facilities have been located deep inside Sichuan to protect them from potential attack.

Stories of survival are still emerging as rescue workers and soldiers probe the wreckage of devastated towns and villages. But the chances of pulling victims alive from the rubble are dimming. Rescue efforts are being hampered by aftershocks and the threat of floods. An aftershock yesterday measuring 6 on the Richter scale, 80 kilometres west of Guangyuan, killed three people and injured another 1,000.

On Saturday, rescuers and residents in Beichuan county, near the quake's epicentre, fled to high ground amid warnings of an imminent flood. The area is in a valley and landslides have blocked local rivers upstream. While the warning proved to be a false alarm, rising water levels could still burst through the blockage and unleash flash flooding. In addition, 17 dams and reservoirs have been damaged. Some have been constructed quite recently with an eye to quick profits, rather than safety.

Hot, humid weather and overcrowded temporary shelter have heightened the danger of epidemics among survivors. World Health Organisation official Arturo Pesigan warned: "Unsafe food and a lack of access to safe water, facilities for personal hygiene and safe sanitation arrangements are creating a real risk of outbreaks of infectious disease at any time."

Acutely sensitive to any sign of political unrest, the Chinese leadership has gone to great lengths to demonstrate its sympathy for the victims. President Hu Jintao arrived at Sichuan on May 16 to relieve Premier Wen, who had been dashing from one disaster site to another to show his personal concern. In an unusual break from the security protocol, Hu was even shown on television shaking hands with Wen at Mianyang's airport.

The movements of senior officials are normally cloaked in complete secrecy.

However, questions and criticisms of the Chinese government's relief efforts and the high death toll, particularly among school children, have begun to emerge via the Internet. According to the Associated Press, one post on the FanFou blog site asked last Thursday: "Why were most of those killed in the earthquake children?" Another questioned: "How many donations will really reach the disaster area? This is doubtful."

The official Xinhua newsagency warned last week against online messages that "spread false information, made sensational statements and sapped public confidence". China has a large Internet police force devoted to clamping down, particularly on any sign of political opposition.

At the popular Tianya online forum, one post that was deleted declared: "A politician visited Dujiangyan for less than two minutes, and police kept the people away. Most residents don't even know he ever came! Who can tell me, where is the food and water that is being promised by the city government? ... I paid 50 kuai [about \$7] to get on a vehicle to drive me away from this hell."

Growing anger is being directed at the shoddy character of school buildings in the region—more than 6,900 classrooms were destroyed by the earthquake. It is estimated that 40 percent of the victims are children. In some towns, virtually an entire generation has been wiped out. China's "One Child" policy means that many parents have lost their only child.

The *Australian* newspaper today reported a tragic scene in the town of Hanwang. Zhi Gao, a 35-year-old mother waited in front of the debris of the four-storey school building, where her 10-year-old daughter, Du Jing, was trapped. The girl had been alive and conscious for two days, but by the time the rescue team arrived, her "legs had stopped moving". Some 300 children were buried at the site.

In order to placate public anger, Chinese authorities have promised an inquiry into substandard buildings and to punish those responsible. The inquiry, however, will undoubtedly be limited to identifying a few scapegoats. The real reason for the widespread flouting of basic building standards is speculative profiteering encouraged by Beijing's own pro-market policies and rampant corruption at all levels of government.

The catastrophe in Sichuan has raised broader questions about the quality and safety of construction throughout China. An article on the *Asia Times* website on May 16

said many local governments have been engaged in drives to expand their urban areas as quickly as possible. Not only have building codes been disregarded, but enormous resentment has built up toward developers who often rely on the police to forcibly evict residents or compulsorily acquire lands from farmers.

Chengdu, the provincial capital of Sichuan, announced plans earlier this year to spend 10 billion yuan (\$1.4 billion) to build an entire new town in its north. "Now, poorly planned renovations and 'cosmetic' civic enhancements have building experts concerned that ordinary people may suffer rather than benefit from this new round of city renovations," *Asia Times* stated. Chengdu is not alone. Other Chinese cities have been doing the same in order to convince investors of the economic potential of their area and impress their superiors in the Communist Party hierarchy.

The boom in China's property market in recent years has pushed up land prices, which have become a significant source of private wealth. Enforcing building codes to ensure public safety, including from earthquakes, is the last consideration—except in the case of major projects owned by large corporations or foreign investors.

The *Asia Times* article continued: "In fact, under the banner of 'city renovation', local officials in the name of the government could throw local residents off their land and use it for their own purposes. The officials and their cronies then could launch developments by themselves or sell the lots to others to make handsome profits. Through such 'land laundering', the officials and their cronies could make millions of yuan at expense of residents and safety regulations."

Much-needed public facilities, such as schools and hospitals, are starved of state funding and their construction often outsourced to private firms. The result is a disaster waiting to happen, as is evident in the tragedy unfolding in Sichuan where public buildings and the homes of the poor have been the hardest hit. For all its public expressions of concern for the quake victims, the Chinese regime bears a heavy responsibility for the present toll of death and destruction.



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