

Chinese leaders respond to anger over shoddy buildings and lack of help

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Eleven days after the deadly earthquake hit Sichuan province on May 12, the Chinese government is turning from rescue to relief and reconstruction. Yesterday it revised the number of dead and missing to 80,000. The confirmed death toll is 51,151 and another 300,000 people have been injured. As the official three-day period of national mourning ended, the biggest issue confronting Beijing is how to cope with some 5 million homeless people and to rebuild the many flattened towns and villages.

The search for buried survivors is being scaled back. Most of the rescue teams and troops have begun to leave the affected areas, despite the danger of new disasters. Landslides and quake debris have blocked rivers and streams, creating 34 unstable “barrier lakes”. These lakes could burst, unleashing devastating floods on downstream communities in the upcoming rainy season. Yun Xiao, vice minister of land and resources, told reporters that residents at risk had been evacuated.

The Chinese government is clearly worried about the potential for political unrest. On Wednesday, Premier Wen Jiabao announced the establishment of a 70 billion yuan (\$US10.14 billion) reconstruction fund for Sichuan this year. Sensitive to the growing resentment in poor rural areas hardest hit by the quake, Wen declared that the plan would seek “to strike a balance between urban and rural areas, industrial and agricultural production.”

At the same time, Beijing is also concerned about the broader economic and political impact. Sichuan is one of China’s largest producers of grains and pork, as well as substantial energy and minerals. The disruption to the production by the quake may well further fuel inflation, which rose 8.5 percent in April—the highest in 11 years. Promising action, Wen declared: “We will prevent prices rising too fast, strengthen supervision of

the prices of key commodities and punish unscrupulous merchants making profits through hoarding and speculations.”

However, the most immediate source of resentment has been the fact that luxury government buildings in Sichuan are still standing, while the homes of the poor and the schools for their children were devastated by the earthquake. To placate rising anger, Wen has temporarily halted new construction projects for government and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) offices. He also ordered cutbacks to other obvious privileges enjoyed by CCP leaders, including expensive official meetings, new cars and overseas trips.

There are obvious signs that the relief effort is completely inadequate. Thousands of people from throughout the area have been gathering at the train station and airport in Chengdu, Sichuan’s provincial capital, over recent days. Some simply want to leave because of the risk of aftershocks and landslides. Many more, however, have lost their homes and are leaving to try to find work in other provinces, as the government provided only minimal, short-term financial support.

After the initial shock, grievances have begun to emerge. Many survivors lack shelter as there is a serious lack of tents for the homeless. The government has appealed for more than three million tents—but only 400,000 have been delivered so far. President Hu Jintao has visited factories in Huzhou city in eastern Zhejiang province yesterday in order to publicly appeal for workers to produce more tents for Sichuan.

The Associated Press reported on Wednesday that 70 farmers in the mountain town of Xinhua pressed against the gate of the local government building, demanding tents. A farmer Zhou explained: “The government said they would deliver more tents last night. But we never got them. It rained last night and it

looks like it will again tonight.” The protestors were surrounded by a dozen soldiers who were guarding the compound.

The resentment is not just about tents. Li Bai, a shopkeeper, alleged that local officials needed to be bribed to get things done. “After Hu Jintao came here, they finally started taking this disaster seriously. The central government just doesn’t know how corrupt the officials are here. They just need to come more often to see it for themselves,” Li told the Associated Press.

Despite the Chinese government’s promise to punish corrupt officials and businessmen responsible for substandard construction, protests have begun to take place especially over the shoddy building of schools in which thousands of children died. Reuters reported on Wednesday that hundreds of relatives had placed wreaths along the road leading to Fuxing primary school in Wufu, where 127 children were killed. They hoisted a banner that read: “The children did not die of a natural disaster but of an unsafe building.”

In the town of Yinhua, where 200 students were killed, Luo Zaihong, a mother who lost her daughter, told Reuters that the school building had only two levels in 1993, but two more were later added illegally. “When it collapsed it was just fragments, not blocks. That shows how badly built it was,” she said. In Juyuan, where more than 500 students died in a collapsed middle school, 100 parents signed a petition that has been circulating in the town to demand the punishment of local education officials.

The most explosive protest occurred yesterday in Dujiangyan, where 200 parents who lost their children at Xin Jian Primary School, thronged into the tents set up by the local education bureau, smashing computers and knocking down three tents. The parents had earlier submitted a petition demanding an explanation as to whether government officials had been bribed to cut construction costs. Some 300 police officers were sent to break up the demonstration, but it is unclear what happened as reporters were barred from the area.

The CCP’s propaganda authorities have tightened their grip over coverage. The country’s Internet police have been increasingly active against any “rumour” that might create panic and chaos. A notice on the web site of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television demanded that all media outlets must “gather their minds and resources around the directives

from the central government and... cover the disaster rescue and relief efforts with a high sense of political responsibility”.

Nevertheless the fact that the CCP has been compelled to carry out an unprecedented PR campaign points to profound changes in Chinese society. The television has been flooded with images of “Grandpa Wen Jiabao” among the quake survivors, particularly children. Never before has a three-day period of national mourning been held for ordinary people—previously such events were held to mark the death of prominent leaders.

The CCP leaders are well aware of the threat to their rule posed by the emergence of any opposition as well as the inadequacy of the police state methods. Despite state censorship, the explosion of Internet and cell phone use in China has meant that hundreds of millions of people are able to communicate relatively freely. The CCP was compelled to respond to the outpouring of sympathy and support across China for the quake survivors in order to try to prevent it becoming a source of criticism and political opposition.

In 1976, the massive Tangshan earthquake coincided with the death of Mao Zedong. The news of that disaster, which killed a quarter million people, took weeks to be made public. The regime ruled over a sea of isolated rural towns and villages amid a few major industrial centres and was able to maintain almost total control over the media and all forms of communication.

This is no longer possible today. Not only have the means of communication changed, but the opening up of China to foreign investment that accelerated after Mao’s death, has created huge new battalions of workers who are concentrated in the rapidly expanding cities. Far from a newfound openness on the part of the CCP leaders, the latest PR campaign points to the fragility of the regime as it attempts to supplement its police state methods with media spin and appeals for national unity.



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