

Chinese earthquake victims face continuing hardship and new threats

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Nearly three weeks after the earthquake that struck the southwestern Chinese province of Sichuan, millions of people are still struggling to cope with its devastating impact. With more than 68,000 dead and 18,000 missing, the final toll is likely to exceed 80,000.

An estimated 5 million people have lost their homes and are living in makeshift shelters without adequate supplies. They are vulnerable to new disasters, including flooding and disease, not to mention the continuing threat of powerful aftershocks. Two tremors on Tuesday destroyed 420,000 more houses in Sichuan as well as in Shaanxi province, hundreds of miles away. Last Sunday, another strong aftershock hit northern Sichuan, destroying thousands more homes.

The sheer scale of the relief operation indicates the extent of the disaster. Lu Dengming, deputy commander of Chengdu Military Zone, centred at the provincial capital, told reporters on Wednesday that 178,000 troops and paramilitary police have been deployed. They have transported more than half a million tonnes of aid by land and another 5,360 tonnes via air. The army has repaired 4,281 kilometres of damaged roads, built 119,000 tents and cleared more than 2 million cubic metres of rubble. The military has rescued 3,336 survivors, treated 305,000 and built 44 makeshift schools.

The arrival of the rainy season compounds the danger of severe flooding from the sudden bursting of river blockages caused by landslides. The authorities are considering the evacuation of around 1.3 million people in the Mianyang region where 36 “quake lakes” have been formed by blocked rivers—28 of these are at the risk of bursting.

The biggest threat is from the Tangjiashan “quake lake” on the Jianhe River, which is holding back an estimated 170 million cubic metres of water. As water levels keep rising, 1,000 Chinese soldiers and engineers are working against the clock to dig channels, using explosives and heavy machinery airlifted to the site. The aim is to gradually drain the water and ease the pressure on the “dam”.

Tangjiashan is located just north of the one of the worst-hit towns, Beichuan, where 80 percent of buildings were flattened. On Friday, 197,500 people were moved from the Jianhe river valley. Much larger evacuations may be necessary, however, putting huge new strains on the overstretched relief effort.

The Chinese media reported this week that drills have taken place involving the rapid movement of thousands of people to high ground. But it is unclear how 300,000 people could be evacuated from Jiangyou city, for instance, within the required 70 minutes. According to the *New York Times* on May 29, the head of relief operations in Mianyang said the aim was to move 1.3 million people within four hours with zero deaths if the Tangjiashan bank collapses.

In addition to the “quake lakes”, dozens of dams have been damaged. Some are leaking, posing additional risks. These projects were often built in a rush with an eye to quick profits from China’s growing demand for power, rather than based on careful, scientific planning.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao has prioritised the handling of the “quake lakes”. However, one water resource official told Agence France-Press that the response at the local government level is slow. “Sometimes local governments think that evacuation is too much trouble, and they’re betting it won’t really be necessary, because they’re not sure how big the risk might be”, the official said.

The unleashing of “market reform” over the past two decades in China has severely undermined local government authorities and any coordination with central authorities. Cities, towns and regions are in a frantic competition against one another for investment. Local governments often cover up natural disasters, environmental problems or health threats to avoid footing the costs and prevent any disruption to production.

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials have absurdly claimed in recent days that the relief effort has demonstrated “the efficiency of socialism”. In reality, the anarchic operation of the capitalist market in China has severely compromised the coordination of relief operations and the provision of essential services. During the “snow havoc” earlier this year, state power companies for instance refused to cooperate and created deliberate brownouts, in order to pressure authorities to remove electricity price caps that cut into profits.

Many of those involved in the relief operation are undoubtedly genuinely concerned for the survivors. But the mobilisation of top leaders such as Premier Wen is part of a PR campaign designed to paper over serious deficiencies in the relief effort in order to placate public opinion and reassure

foreign investors that the state machinery can handle such emergencies. Just below the surface, the inadequacies are evident.

China's leading financial magazine, *Caijing*, reported on May 27 on the chaotic situation in hospitals in the city of Mianyang. There are three categories of patients. In the first are those brought in by the army or a rescue team. The government will cover their medical costs. In the second are those transferred from the affected areas. Their expenses will also be covered. But the third group—refugees who have turned up at hospitals on their own—will have only part of their expenses reimbursed, or none at all. They have to show an ID card and a “refugee certificate”, but in many cases ID cards were lost or destroyed in the disaster.

Thousands of people have been transferred to hospitals in other provinces. “Some hospitals and agencies affected by these inter-province transfers of the injured have been forced to scramble for funds. *Caijing* learned that financing measures vary from one province to another,” the article explained. In Hubei, for example, provincial government will cover the expenses, while in Chongqing, the injured and their nurses will receive subsidies. This lack of centralised standards and regulations is the product of the “user-pay” system introduced in the 1990s, with public hospitals effectively run as private business.

The CCP is deeply concerned that the earthquake has exposed the glaringly corrupt and incompetent character of its bureaucratic regime. There has been an unprecedented outpouring of sympathy throughout China among the working people and offers of assistance to the quake victims. An estimated 200,000 volunteers from other parts of the country are involved in relief efforts in Sichuan. Donations from within China and internationally have reached 35 billion yuan or \$US5 billion.

Internet reports accusing local officials of corruption in handling aid have led to protests. The government has been forced to promise “quick, strict and harsh penalties” against corrupt practices. More than 300 professionals from the National Audit Office and local audit offices have been allocated to ensure the “transparent” use of donations. Beijing is acutely conscious that anger could quickly erupt. There is widespread resentment in Sichuan over the shoddy construction of building, particularly schools, which led to many deaths.

Liu Jingbo, a professor at the Construction Institute of Disaster Preparation and Relief at Tsinghua University, told the *International Herald Tribune* on May 29: “When I saw the footage of Beichuan City after the earthquake, I was stunned. How could a populous city be built in such a risky area, particularly right at the foot of mountains? When an earthquake occurs, it's not just the collapse of buildings that buries people, but boulders and huge rocks and mud flows follow on immediately.”

Liu blamed the urban planning “ignorance” of the local

government for the death of 15,000 people in that city. As in other parts of China, it is not so much ignorance, but the drive for profit by developers and local government that is responsible for the flouting of building codes and their limited safety requirements.

An estimated 10,000 children died when school buildings collapsed. Parents who lost their children have staged protests in several cities since last weekend demanding the punishment of corrupt officials for authorising substandard school buildings. One of the protests involved hundreds of parents whose children died at Fuxin No.2 Primary School in Mianzhu city. They surrounded a local party official and accused her of covering up the 127 deaths in the school.

The *New York Times* reported: “The next day, the Communist Party's top official in Mianzhu came out to talk with the parents and to try to stop them from marching to Chengdu, the provincial capital, where they sought to prevail on high-level authorities to investigate. The local party boss, Jiang Guohua, dropped to his knees and pleaded with them to abandon the protest, but the parents shouted in his face and continued their march.”

Pictures of Jiang on his knees, pleading with the people, caused a sensation in China where local party bosses are notorious as tyrants. As with the personal presence of Premier Wen and President Hu Jintao in the quake areas, CCP officials are learning to use media spin. But that is only half the story. When the crowd of protestors surged, they clashed with police, injuring some parents. In other words, in the final analysis, the regime still relies on police-state measures.

The *Financial Times* noted on May 29 that ordinary people so far have been blaming only local officials for incompetence, indifference and corruption. There are still illusions that the “just emperor” at the top of the bureaucracy is genuinely concerned for the victims. “Such a belief is reinforced by government media controls that ensure people see little of their leaders' human failings but are granted blanket coverage of their labours on behalf of the masses,” the article stated.

But the mouthpiece for British capital is well aware of the fragility of the situation, warning: “Popular opinion could turn if enough people conclude the notion of a just emperor is, in fact, mere myth.”



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