

Rising death toll, popular anger in China quake

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21 May 2008

Official casualty figures in the May 12 earthquake disaster in southwestern China's Sichuan province continue to rise, amid continuing concerns about possible aftershocks, flash flooding and sanitary conditions. Reports have also begun to emerge of organized protests against shoddy construction, especially by parents whose children were killed in the numerous school collapses caused by the earthquake.

According to state wire service Xinhua, the Information Office of the State Council confirmed the death toll yesterday as 40,075 nationwide, including 39,577 in Sichuan province. Another 32,361 persons were missing as of yesterday at noon. Unfortunately, since the quake now happened over a week ago, it must be feared that most of those still trapped under debris have died; according to Xinhua, only two people were found alive yesterday—one thanks to rainwater that collected close to where she was trapped. The final death toll thus is likely to top 70,000.

The official number of injured has also risen, with 236,359 injuries confirmed in Sichuan province alone as of yesterday at 4 p.m.

Over 4.8 million people have been made homeless. Vice-Minister for Civil Affairs Jiang Li told reporters, "Despite generous donations, the disaster is so great that victims still face a challenge in finding living accommodations." So far 278,000 tents have been sent to the quake zones, with 700,000 more ordered and factories working triple shifts to meet demand.

Chinese military sources told Xinhua that they had finally reached all 1,044 villages in the townships near the epicenter of the earthquake. Some villages had been completely cut off, with the 32-kilometer mountain path to Maliuping village, where 86 survivors were found, blocked by 37 landslides.

Officials have announced limited financial assistance to some quake victims. The Finance and Civil Affairs ministries will together provide to each homeless quake victim who lacks an income a daily subsidy of 10 yuan—roughly half the minimum wage in Sichuan province—and 500 grams of food for three months, starting

from late May. Orphans, widowed elders with no children and handicapped persons who lost relatives will receive another monthly subsidy of 600 yuan for three months.

The earthquake area faces numerous health and safety concerns. Although this weekend's fears of dam collapses that would lead to massive flash flooding went unrealized, local authorities have been ordered to continue monitoring the region's hundreds of dams, which have suffered varying degrees of damage; moderate rain has been forecast for the coming days.

Drinking water and sanitation pose a problem, with the Ministry of Environmental Protection telling Xinhua that dead bodies and chemical waste are the biggest threats. Xinhua wrote: "As of 2 p.m. Monday, 80 percent of the dead in Sichuan had been buried or cremated, while all bodies in other provinces reporting quake deaths have been properly handled to prevent possible plague in the quake zones." Among chemical waste disasters, the most prominent was perhaps the collapse of two chemical plants in Shifang, leaking 80 tons of ammonia into the environment.

Large-scale aftershocks continue to shake the region, damaging buildings and causing further landslides. According to government sources, 158 rescue workers were killed in landslides from May 17 to 19.

Officials evacuated 9,000 residents of Guangyuan after numerous crevices—measuring up to 1500m long, 250m high, and 50 cm wide—were spotted on neighboring Shiziliang Mountain. The mountain sank 1 meter during the quake, severely damaging many roads. Officials at Guangyuan's relief headquarters said any new aftershock or heavy rainfall could trigger serious landslides.

Sichuan's provincial seismological bureau forecast on Monday that a major aftershock of a magnitude between 6 and 7 on the Richter scale was likely to again shake Wenchuan County, the epicenter of the May 12 quake. Reported on provincial television and radio stations, these forecasts alarmed the population.

Sichuan province's capital, Chengdu (population 10.5 million), was hit by traffic jams on Monday night as

residents sought to leave the city en masse. Residents spent the night in city parks with tents, to avoid being caught inside asleep by an earthquake. Xinhua reported that most of the urban residents of Chongqing—a provincial-level municipality neighboring Sichuan province, with an urban population over 4 million—slept in tents Monday night, after reports that the aftershock would hit Chongqing as well.

Xinhua also reported complaints from the population that the seismological warnings were coming “too late.” Certainly these reports raise questions about how the seismological bureau was able to give advance warning of the possibility of an aftershock, but not of the far more powerful May 12 earthquake.

The earthquake is now a national political issue in China. With a significant fraction of the population having access to cell phones or Internet service—in 2007, 150 million cell phones were sold in China, which has roughly 200 million Internet users—the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has abandoned the kind of effort at outright censorship of media reports it carried out during the 1976 Tangshan earthquake. It now faces an unprecedented situation of 24-hour coverage of its disaster recovery efforts by media outlets.

At 2:28 p.m. yesterday, one week exactly after the quake hit, traffic stopped throughout China and millions of people observed three minutes of silence.

Several towns in Sichuan have seen protests by parents over shoddy construction in schools, many of which collapsed during the quake while neighboring buildings remained standing. Hundreds of parents in Juyuan held a rally and circulated a petition demanding a memorial day for their deceased children.

Zhao Deqin, who lost two daughters in the earthquake, told *Reuters*: “We want a memorial day for the children, but we also want criminal prosecution for those responsible, no matter who they are. How come all the houses didn’t fall down, but the school did? And how come that happened in so many places?” Holding up a bag of powdery concrete from the school, she added: “This will be evidence at the trial. This is what killed them.”

Pu Changxue, whose son Pu Tong died crushed in a classroom, said: “This was a tofu dregs project and the government should assume responsibility. We all know that earthquakes are natural disasters. But what happened to our children also has human causes, and they’re even more frightening.” Tofu dregs—the messy leftovers after making bean curd—are a common expression for low-quality work.

The issue of local CCP officials’ profiting from poor construction that cost schoolchildren their lives is highly politically explosive. In a sign of their concern over the political situation, Chinese officials have repeatedly refused

to give estimates of the total number of children killed in the earthquake.

Nor is the nervousness limited to the Chinese bourgeoisie. Yesterday US President George W. Bush and his wife, Laura Bush, visited the Chinese embassy in Washington, DC, to sign a condolence book for quake victims. Bush said the country was “ready to assist in any manner that China deems helpful.” In the condolence book, he wrote: “We stand with you during this tragic moment as you mourn the loss of so many of your loved ones and search for those still missing.”

This reaction stands in stark contrast to the Bushes’ reaction to the cyclone tragedy in Myanmar. On May 5 Laura Bush denounced Myanmar’s military government as “very inept” and criticized them for not letting US State Department personnel into the country to assess the damage. She then offered a hopelessly inadequate \$250,000 in aid, contingent on letting the State Department teams into Myanmar, and added: “If we can get some sort of team in there to assess what the other needs are, then I feel very assured that the United States government will follow with a bigger [aid response].”

The fact that China has let not let US and British rescue teams into Sichuan province either—although it did allow teams from Russia, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong—did not seem to concern the Bushes.

Underlying the difference in the response to the two natural disasters are the US’ differing stakes in the two countries. The Myanmar regime has not allowed American investment in its economy, especially its booming natural gas sector.

On the other hand, the US ruling class has an immense stake in China. China has greeted hundreds of billions of dollars of investment by Western and Japanese corporations. Each year it produces hundreds of billions of dollars of cheap exports in low-wage factories and lends hundreds of billions of dollars to US consumers to buy them.



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