

China drains “quake lake”, but dangers remain

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A month after the May 12 earthquake in south-western China, aftershocks and “quake lakes” continue to threaten the lives of millions in Sichuan province. According to the latest figures, the quake, which measured 8 on the Richter scale, killed 69,159 people with 17,469 still missing.

Chinese officials announced on Tuesday that they had successfully lowered water levels in the Tangjiashan quake lake—the largest of 30 similar lakes that were formed when landslides caused by the earthquake blocked rivers in mountainous areas. These naturally created dams, which hold large amounts of water, are highly unstable.

Chinese authorities started to drain the Tangjiashan lake last week, after evacuating about 250,000 people from the downstream areas. According to government estimates, more than one million people, mainly from Mianyang city, would have been forced to move if the lake had broken. While thousands of refugees have already been evacuated to higher ground, summer temperatures and the lack of basic facilities are increasing local anger and resentment.

Zhang Ting, the head of Sichuan’s hydro-meteorological bureau, told the Xinhua newsagency: “Controlling the lake outflow is critical for the dam’s safety. If the water flows out too slowly, the accumulating inflow will increase pressure on the barrier, but too strong an outflow will also erode the diversion channel and lead to the dam collapsing.”

In order to manage the flow, military engineers fired rockets and detonated tonnes of explosives to remove boulders, widen the main drainage channel and create an additional diversion ditch. These measures finally lowered water levels and eased pressure on the dam.

While Chinese authorities are relieved that the quake lakes have not produced a major disaster, increasing rains and ongoing aftershocks could still produce a sudden collapse of these naturally formed dams.

Water Resources Minister Chen Lei told the Xinhua news agency on Wednesday: “Another major test for us is coming as the flood season approaches. The best situation is to completely clear the water from the Tangjiashan lake before the flood season begins.”

Notwithstanding Beijing’s attempts to show concern about the plight of earthquake refugees, it is dependent on police-state methods to deal with any political opposition over its response to the earthquake.

A front-page report in Tuesday’s *People’s Daily* pointed out that Zhou Yongkang, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo Standing Committee’s chief of state security, visited the quake affected areas for five days. He urged police and legal authorities to “solve disputes and help maintain social stability”.

After several weeks of relatively lax control over media coverage, the CCP regime has also begun banning reporters from entering devastated areas or interviewing grieving parents who lost their children in the estimated 7,000 classrooms that collapsed during the quake.

On June 2, about 100 parents from Xiang’er village were pushed back by armed police after they attempted to march to Dujiangyang city in protest over the shoddy construction of a middle school. At least one parent was beaten during the confrontation. On June 10, police also blocked 150 parents from Juyuang Middle School from entering a local court to file a lawsuit over the collapsed school that killed most of its 900 students. Associated Press journalists in attendance were dragged into the court-house for questioning. The police crackdown occurred as a leading CCP boss, Li Changchun, was touring the area.

On June 11, dozens of armed police rounded up more than 20 volunteer aid workers planning to hold a memorial service for students killed at Beichuan Middle School. Yesterday, 250 protesting parents blocked the major road south of hard-hit Beichuan, after a memorial plaque to dead students and teachers from the middle school was vandalised overnight.

Liu Xiaobo, a political dissident jailed for his involvement in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, told the *Washington Post* on June 6: “The possibility that the government would send the petitioning parents to jail cannot be eliminated.”

According to the newspaper, many parents were attempting to develop support from other schools and

districts to demand punishment of the corrupt CCP officials and businessmen responsible for the poorly constructed classrooms. At least one parent has contacted about 1,000 others to organise a protest in Beijing during the Olympic Games in August if their demands are not addressed.

The devastating results of the earthquake have exposed how Beijing's "market reforms" have weakened coordinated efforts to deal with natural disasters.

While five million homeless people are desperately waiting for a roof over their heads, the Chinese government, after privatising thousands of companies during the 1990s, has turned back to the decayed public sector for reconstruction. State-owned enterprises have been ordered to build one million prefabricated houses in the next three months and although Beijing will cover 90 percent of the 9 billion yuan (\$US1.3 billion) required, the houses are expected to last only 3-5 years.

Sichuan faces the daunting task of rebuilding flattened towns but some communities will never be restored and the prospect for relocated communities is grim. Like the towns flooded to make way for the Yangtze River's Three Gorges Dam, the new settlements could become economic basket cases with high levels of chronic unemployment and endemic poverty. Nor can protection be guaranteed against future earth tremors in the rebuilt towns.

Several seismologists have blamed the government for ignoring repeated warnings about a major quake in the region and failing to strengthen buildings in Sichuan. Gao Jiangguo, a researcher in the China Earthquake Administration, told the *New York Times* on June 5: "We told them things should be built to withstand seven-degree crack resistance, but we should have insisted on ninth degree, just as experts from the Soviet Union advised us back in the 1950s."

Gao was referring to the Degree 7 quake intensity used in building codes—a measure of how far the ground moves from its original position during an earthquake. The intensity of the May 12 earthquake, however, was Degree 9, far higher than anything designed for Sichuan. For the poor in this area, however, there are almost no building regulations.

Liu Hang, from the Beijing Construction Engineering Research Institute, explained: "The quake-proof level for Wenchuan's [the epicentre] local buildings is rated Degree 7, but based on what I've seen on-site, the buildings there are far from reaching this standard. Let's not talk about whether the degree of quake-proofing is high enough. The buildings in the affected areas have no quake-proof protection at all."

Liu pointed out that major business centres and the homes of the new wealthy elite in big cities such as Beijing, have been constructed according to strong anti-quake standards.

"Unless the epicentre of an earthquake like this occurred right in Tiananmen Square, central Beijing would not be seriously damaged," he said.

Constructing earthquake resistant housing translates into higher prices, which the poor cannot afford. Moreover, government officials, working in collusion with real estate and property developers, largely ignore basic safety regulations for higher profits or kickbacks. At the same time, party bosses ensure that their homes and offices are built to the highest standards.

This is a national phenomenon. An article in the *Financial Times* on May 30 pointed to a typical town in Fuyang, in Anhui province, more than 2,000-kilometres from Sichuan's epicentre. In the past six years, children at a local primary school have been forced to move three times in order to make way for various real estate projects.

"The first time they were evicted was when their school was demolished to make way for the district government office building—an enormous baroque palace that locals refer to as the 'White House' though it bears a greater resemblance to the US Capitol building in Washington DC," the *Financial Times* wrote.

While the "White House" is used as the Yingquang district headquarters and cost 30 million yuan (\$US4.3 million), the district where it is located is impoverished, with 660,000 people each living on a monthly income of just 200 yuan (\$29).

This social inequality characterises many of the towns and small cities in Sichuan that were demolished in the earthquake. Schools, houses and hospitals have collapsed completely, while monumental local government premises are often the only structures still standing.



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