

China: Guizhou riots over cover-up of teenager's death

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On June 26 popular anger at the response of local authorities to a teenage girl's death in the inland province of Guizhou boiled over in a riot of 10,000 people, who burned local Communist Party offices and vehicles in Wengan county. The central government's response—it sent 1,500 military police to forcibly occupy the area—further underscores the explosive tensions building up between the Communist Party and the mass of the Chinese population.

The events center around the death of a 15-year-old identified as Li Shufen, whose body was found in a river on June 22. Relatives told the media that she disappeared after having been seen with young men related to local Communist Party officials—one of them the son of the vice-head of Wengan county, according to some reports. Local residents alleged that she had been raped and then murdered and her corpse dumped in the river.

With the help of about 100 other inhabitants, Li Shufen's parents Li Xiuhua and Luo Pingbi mounted a 24-hour guard around their daughter's coffin. They told the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* they feared local police would steal the corpse to hide evidence of the crime, and that there had already been two attempts to do so on June 22 and June 26.

A police investigation concluded that Li had committed suicide by jumping into the river, and denied all allegations of criminal behavior.

Mass rioting erupted after Li Shufen's uncle, Li Xiuzhong, a high school teacher, went to local police to protest their handling of the case and was badly beaten. A resident told Agence France-Presse reporters in Wengan: "As he was a teacher at the local high school, students from local schools went to the police to ask for justice, dozens of them I think, then some students were beaten by the police."

As news of the beatings spread, crowds gathering outside of government offices rioted on June 26. The BBC carried pictures of the local Communist Party headquarters, which had been ransacked, gutted by fire, and its windows smashed. It added that several police stations and vehicles had been attacked and burned and that one local government office had burned to the ground.

On June 28, 1,500 military police were sent to cordon off Wengan, sealing off key intersections and arresting between 200 and 300 people.

According to July 1 reports in the *South China Morning Post*, a senior Public Security Bureau official, surnamed Zhou, traveled from Guizhou's capital Guiyang to Wengan and notified Li Shufen's parents that three suspects had offered to pay 3,000 yuan (approximately US\$430) each in "compensation money."

Li Xiuhua told the *Post*: "We will never accept an evil deal like this. We need to seek justice for our daughter." He said that his daughter "received three phone calls from them that night, and at first she didn't want to go out because it's too dangerous for girls to go out after 7 p.m. in this place." He added that an official had told him and his wife, "Don't even try to file a lawsuit; there's no justice in this world."

On July 3 the *Post* carried another interview with Li Xiuhua, who said he had been forced to accept a monetary payment in exchange for endorsing the police version of events. He said: "My mobile phone has been bugged since Tuesday. We are very scared but we can do nothing." He said that dozens of officials had visited him and his wife: "They talked to me from around 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. and forced me to sign a document to accept 30,000 yuan as my daughter's funeral expenses. We faced great pressure from officials—people from

provincial government and the police. I have to accept their arrangement because I am just a farmer.”

The sudden eruption of pitched battle between police authorities and the people of Wengan testifies to the widespread popular hatred of the Communist Party officialdom, which has been the main beneficiary of the policies of privatization and free enterprise adopted by the Beijing Stalinists since Deng Xiaoping’s turn towards capitalism in 1979. This social inequality often finds violent expression in especially poor, rural inland regions such as Guizhou province—where the 2007 monthly minimum wage was 550 yuan, versus 750 yuan in Zhejiang and 780 yuan in Guangdong, two coastal provinces with powerful export industries.

A 2006 report to the US Congress, citing Chinese Communist Party documents, estimated that there were 58,000 “incidents of social unrest” in China in 2003—a category including protests, demonstrations, picketing and group petitioning—then 74,000 in 2004 and 87,000 in 2005. Thanks to official censorship and reluctance by the Western media to probe connections between the Chinese cheap-labor economy and global capitalism, only a fraction of these events is reported in the international media. A prominent exception was the December 2005 clash between paramilitary police and villagers in Dongzhou protesting against lack of compensation for land confiscation by local officials.

Accusations of official corruption also featured prominently after May’s devastating earthquake in Sichuan province, which neighbors Guizhou, when thousands of students were killed as poorly constructed schools collapsed, burying students inside.

Beijing responded to the Wengan riots with a drive to enforce order, especially in the politically sensitive time leading up to the August 2008 Beijing Olympics, when it fears that embarrassing incidents could lower China’s global prestige.

A Reuters dispatch quoted from an official report on a nationwide “stability drive” promoted by Beijing: “The Beijing Olympics are approaching and properly carrying out petition and stability work, protecting social harmony and stability, and ensuring the Beijing Olympics go safely and smoothly has become a tough battle that every department at every level must win.”

The *Guizhou Daily* meanwhile reported that provincial and local party bosses had analyzed the causes of the riot. While avoiding discussion of the role

of particular local officials, they attributed the incident to organized crime, growing social tensions due to forced evictions for real estate development and privatization of state enterprises, lack of moral standards in party cadre, official indifference to the people’s daily conditions of life and lack of contact between party officials and the people.

On July 1 a Guizhou Provincial Public Security Department spokesman issued an announcement, endorsed by Guizhou Communist Party chief Shi Zongyuan and following instructions from Chinese President Hu Jintao, denouncing the protest as the actions of “unlawful elements” and “local gangsters.”

The *South China Morning Post* carried bitter criticisms of such accusations by local residents and Internet commentators. One writer posted a note to an Internet forum, saying, “Our daughter is raped, and you call us gangsters? We were arrested when we were enraged by the crime and asked the government to punish the criminals according to the law. We were confused and had no hope. Why detain us? The government told us the answer—that it was because we are gangsters.”



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