

# Corruption and shoddy construction behind school collapses in China earthquake

**Carol Divjak****16 October 2008**

Four months after the massive earthquake in Sichuan province on May 12, a Chinese government committee finally admitted last month that shoddy workmanship and substandard materials—the result of corrupt collusion between local officials and construction companies—were behind the collapse of 7,000 school classrooms.

While the quake was certainly a natural phenomenon, much of the destruction and many of the deaths could have been avoided. Of the 70,000 killed (not including 18,000 still missing and almost certainly dead), a large number—some 10,000—were students who died as school buildings collapsed.

In many cases, relatively new schools were flattened in a matter of seconds, making it impossible for children to escape. By contrast, the surrounding buildings were often still standing, indicating serious structural problems in school construction. Angry parents denounced the schools as substandard "Tofu" projects—that is, as soft as Chinese bean curd—in which local officials and businessmen siphoned off public money.

At a news conference in Beijing on September 4, Ma Zongjin, director of the National Wenchuan Earthquake Committee, was silent about the school collapses, until asked by a reporter. He then admitted: "In recent years, a lot of school buildings have been built in China and in this process of rapid development, some problems may exist... The structure of the school buildings may not be reasonable enough and the related construction materials may not be strong enough."

It is a politically sensitive question. Thousands of grieving parents have demanded an explanation from the authorities and, in some cases, staged protests. Shoddy school buildings have been widely discussed over the Internet despite the efforts of the Internet police. While seeking to play down the issue, Beijing could not completely ignore it, promising to investigate the school collapses and punish those responsible.

Ma was forced to acknowledge widespread public concern, saying: "This is an issue people are paying attention to. First

the parents of schoolchildren are paying a lot of attention, as well as education departments. Even people across the entire country are very much paying attention to this issue."

Ma admitted that during the investigation by government teams in the quake zone, some local officials tried to overstate the intensity of the earthquake in order to deflect attention from shoddy classroom construction. Other officials inflated the financial losses in their administrative regions to get more aid money.

Ma claimed that 2,000 engineers and building experts had been sent to study the school collapses and found cases of bad urban planning and unenforced building codes, along with generally poor construction. However, despite these official expressions of concern, no one has been held responsible. By contrast, the authorities have responded to parents' petitions and protests with police repression.

According to the *International Herald Tribune*, local governments in Sichuan have been offering parents cash payments in return for signing a paper dropping demands for an investigation into the school collapses. The compensation offered was roughly the same across the province, indicating a policy handed down from the top. In July, parents from the town of Hanwang said they were offered \$US8,800 in cash and a one-off pension payment of about \$5,600 per parent.

Many parents signed the agreements, but were furious with local authorities. Parents, relatives and volunteers who persisted in demanding answers have been subjected to police detention, intimidation and other threats. After obtaining the signed papers, several local governments quickly began bulldozing the school sites, thus destroying any evidence.

The *International Herald Tribune* cited Pu Zhiqiang, a lawyer, who told the parents that any attempt to sue construction companies and local governments would be futile-few, if any, courts would accept such cases. "I provide legal advice for several construction companies. I know there's always corruption involved in construction deals. Construction companies bribe officials to get the deal, and of course they use substandard building materials to keep the

budget low. But even if you win the case over the contractors, those small enterprises are not rich enough to pay the compensation," he explained.

### Class divisions

The quake also exposed the sharp social divide in China. Xinjian Primary School in Dujiangyang city, which was devastated by the disaster, is a prime example. Its four-storey building collapsed within minutes, crushing hundreds of children beneath a sea of bricks and concrete. A five-minute walk away, another primary school, Beijie, built for the wealthy elite and privileged Communist Party bureaucrats, survived. It was in such good condition that officials used it as a refugee centre.

Engineers who examined Xinjian Primary School explained that the building had a critical structural flaw—its vertical columns had inadequate reinforcing rods. Ren Yongchang, whose nine-year-old son died, told the *New York Times*: "This is not a natural disaster". He wept as he grabbed the exposed steel rebar from a shattered concrete column and shouted: "This is not good steel. It doesn't meet standards. They stole our children."

The article explained: "[T]he families who sent their children to Xinjian are neither wealthy nor well connected. They are among the hundreds of millions still struggling to benefit from China's economic rise. Many lost their jobs when a local cement plant shut down. Some sought work in more prosperous areas, leaving their children behind to attend school." These parents were migrant workers—part of the vast army of cheap labour that is exploited by the new capitalist elite and foreign investors.

The schools were all in the heart of Dujiangyan. The elite Beijie was designated as a provincial-level "key" school, with the best facilities and finest teachers. A nearby kindergarten, which also survived, was built and controlled directly by the city government. By contrast, Xinjian was run by a lower, township government that had far less money.

Many parents said they had been told the school was poorly built and unsafe from the day it opened in 1993. It never received an adequate share of government funds for construction or refurbishment because of the low ranking of the local education bureaucracy, due to low social status of its students. When Xinjian was being built, many parents worked at the Donfeng Cement Factory. The company's bosses donated just 40 tonnes of cement, which was not enough. As a result, a lot of sand was added to the concrete. In order to further cut costs, local officials hired farmers, instead of trained construction crews.

This is not an isolated case. The Chinese government has known for years that many schools, especially in rural areas, are unsafe. In 2001, Beijing budgeted just \$US1.5 billion for

a nationwide program to repair unsafe schools—a tiny amount compared to \$43 billion spent on this year's Beijing Olympics. In 2006, the Sichuan provincial government ordered all localities to stop using substandard primary and middle schools. But no one took any notice, because no alternatives were provided.

Most buildings in Sichuan were not required to meet the highest standards for seismic protection, even though the province is prone to quakes. China's design codes rate buildings from a top ranking of 1 down to 4, depending on their importance. Schools were only rated at 3, meaning no additional protection was needed. By contrast, government buildings, business towers and factories, especially those owned by major foreign investors, are generally required to be built with the top standard.

Basic techniques for strengthening buildings in earthquake-prone regions have been established for decades. High-quality concrete embedded with extra iron rods tied into bundles with strong wire is a basic requirement. Floors, walls and columns must be attached with steel binders. The design of the columns is crucial in allowing a building to sway rather than topple during a quake.

However, these measures required additional inputs and therefore cost. Only the best schools are built to such requirements for the children of those who can afford to pay. The vast majority of parents are compelled to send their children to second-class schools, which not only lack facilities and staff, but in many cases are structurally unsound. The Sichuan earthquake has exposed the tragic consequences of the user-pays principle of the capitalist market, which the Chinese regime now applies to all spheres of life.



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