

# Signs of discontent as China's earthquake toll rises

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17 April 2010

In a sign of Beijing's anxiety over potential unrest following Wednesday morning's earthquake in Qinghai province, President Hu Jintao cut short his attendance at a key economic summit in Brazil to return to China. Premier Wen Jiabao cancelled visits to three South East Asian countries and toured the quake-hit Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture on Thursday and yesterday, professing concern for the survivors.

As the official death toll rose above 1,000, Wen made carefully managed visits to the injured, elderly people and newly orphaned children. The public relations operation was reminiscent of his tours to the Sichuan quake zone in May 2008. "Your disaster is my disaster, your suffering is my suffering," Wen told survivors this week. None of this could cover up the desperate poverty of the region, where the lack of basic infrastructure has impeded rescue efforts.

Even as Wen feigned sympathy, 100,000 people were officially homeless and thousands were living in freezing conditions without any shelter. TV footage showed survivors pushing past police to scramble for relief supplies. Outside the municipal government headquarters in Jiegu, several hundred hungry people confronted a cordon of riot police officers, who tried to assure them that there were tents and food for all. As the crowd's anger reached boiling point, the police gave up and allowed them to stream past.

The Tokyo-based *Asahi Shimbun* reported that the Communist Party's Central Publicity Department had issued an internal notice banning Chinese media from reporting criticism of delays in rescue work. The message, given orally to executives of media organisations, instructed them to emphasise the efforts

of party leaders to assist victims. It also stipulated that the media must not report the deaths of students in collapsed schools.

Authorities are also stepping up the presence of security forces. A public security ministry spokesman said small-scale looting had taken place. The looting became a pretext to send in riot police, while traffic police patrolled the roads to prevent protests. Zhou Yongkang, the Politburo Standing Committee's law and order chief, ordered police to "staunchly maintain social order of the disaster zone and ensure social stability."

Poor infrastructure has hampered rescue efforts. Destruction is widespread because of the almost universal collapse of houses made of wood and mud, as well as cheaply-built school buildings. Local hospitals lack doctors, equipment and basic medicines. While a few hundred injured people were sent to hospitals in the major cities of Chengdu and Xining, many have received no treatment at all.

On Thursday, Karma Sherab, a local doctor who just finished an amputation operation, told the official Xinhua news agency: "All we can do is simply treat and wrap the wounds. Surgery is being done in the tent. Some patients whose conditions are too serious to treat, we have to resort to amputation to save their lives."

Many survivors complained they did not have enough food, water and tents. Almost 5,000 people had to sleep in the open on Wednesday night at a horse-racing track, amid strong winds and freezing temperatures. Another 1,000 huddled outside a stadium. A local resident who camped with his wife and four children on a lawn near a police headquarters told the *China Daily* on Friday:

“It’s so cold at night. We need tents and food as soon as possible.”

Zou Ming, the head of civil affairs disaster relief team, promised on Thursday that 10,000 tents would be delivered to Yushu on that day as well as enough warm clothes for the survivors. The Chinese military also planned to drop food for 100,000 people Thursday afternoon. But poor roads and airports delayed the arrival of urgently needed aid and heavy rescue equipment.

Working with just bare hands, ordinary people battled to save trapped victims. In most cases, however, all that rescuers found were dead bodies. Hong Kong’s *Singtao Daily* reported that construction workers came from hundreds of kilometres away to assist with tools and vehicles. About 100 college students speaking fluent Tibetan volunteered to help out as interpreters at hospitals in the provincial capital of Xining.

The shoddily-built mud and wood homes in the towns of Yushu were part of the government’s resettlement policy, implemented since 2000, to force thousands of Tibetan nomads to live in urban areas, supposedly to “civilise” and “modernise” them. In fact, the program was part of the regime’s “Go West” campaign to open up vast untapped natural resources and cheap labour in western China.

Widespread discontent with the social inequality and dislocation produced by the penetration of capitalist relations into these regions was the main factor behind the eruption of protests in 2008 across Tibet, including the neighbouring Yushu prefecture, that were brutally put down by armed police.

The Beijing regime is particularly sensitive to the death toll among school students. On Wednesday evening, the Yushu education authority announced 56 deaths but admitted that the actual number could be much higher. Hundreds of parents and teachers continued to dig with their bare hands to search for missing children. At a press conference on Thursday, local officials avoided questions about whether the student casualties were connected to failures to enforce building safety standards.

Students comprise 18.8 percent of the population—much higher than the national average of 8 percent. At No 3 Primary School, where 3,000 children studied, 200 students remain buried, after teachers battled to pull out 61 students, 34 of whom were subsequently confirmed dead. Deputy principal Wen Ming explained: “Many children were seriously injured; even those reading outside the classrooms were covered by falling walls.” No medical treatment was available for injured students. Those not picked up by their parents had to stay overnight in the playground without shelter in temperatures as low as minus 15 degrees Celsius.

The schools were poorly built due to insufficient funding from Beijing. After the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, in which shoddy school buildings contributed to the death of more than 5,300 students, the regime promised to inspect and reinforce schools in quake-prone regions. In Qinghai, the authorities had pledged to make schools the “safest and most worry-free place for parents” within three years. However, progress to reinforce 4,009 school buildings and rebuild another 9,780 has been slow. According to the *Qinghai Daily*, because of limited funds, the provincial government would be unable to complete the target of finishing 60 percent of the work by the end of this year.

The problem is not lack of resources. China is currently the world’s largest construction site. In response to the global economic crisis, the government unveiled a massive stimulus package of \$US586 billion for infrastructure projects, and directed trillions of dollars of state bank credit into the construction industry, developers and banks, creating a huge property bubble in major cities. Real estate barons now constitute the largest group among China’s 130 dollar billionaires, but to control the resultant public debt and budget deficit Beijing is restraining spending on education and other social services.



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