Protesters storm municipal building in China

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Tens of thousands of people stormed the municipal government building in Qidong, just north of Shanghai, last Saturday. It was another sign that social tensions in China are reaching boiling point. For the second time in a month, a mass protest forced authorities to stop the construction of a polluting industrial facility.

Agence France Presse estimated the size of the demonstration at 50,000. Witness accounts circulated on the Internet, however, pointed to 100,000 people being involved. The Chinese state-controlled media, seeking to downplay the event, said "thousands" participated.

According to Hong Kong's *Eastern Daily*, large number of residents gathered in front of the municipal headquarters on Saturday morning, concerned that their drinking water would be fouled by a planned pipeline to transport waste for a Japanese-owned paper mill.

Shouting slogans against pollution as well as official corruption, the protesters detained the mayor, Xu Feng, and stripped naked the city's Communist Party secretary, Sun Jianghua, before the pair escaped with the help of police. Their offices were ransacked, with demonstrators displaying expensive wines and other gifts to demonstrate their privileged life-styles and collusion with big business. Police and official cars were overturned and smashed. (Click here to see the protesters occupying the government compound).

The unrest only ended after the authorities cancelled the construction of the $US1.95 billion waste facility for Oji Paper.

Earlier, thousands of police, including anti-riot and paramilitary officers, were mobilised, some from neighbouring cities. At least 100 demonstrators were arrested, according to figures circulating on the Internet. Photos of protesters with bloodied faces suggest they were physically attacked.

Images posted on-line also show that the authorities deployed electronic jamming vehicles to cut off mobile phone communications. Other photos show a convoy of military trucks entering a high school, indicating that paramilitary police were mobilised to intimidate students.

Elite armed police SWAT units were present as well. An unnamed witness told the *Financial Times*: "They posted SWAT contingents in front of the government building, and there are military lorries patrolling the streets."

However, the police did not resort to tear gas or random baton beating, as happened last month during the suppression of mass protests by rural migrant workers in a clothing industry district of Zhongshang city, in Guangdong province.

This apparent restraint may have been because the authorities were seeking to divert the anger over the plant in a nationalist, anti-Japanese direction. Media accounts indicated that some in the crowd linked the Japanese-owned Oji Paper company to Japan's territorial dispute with China in the East China Sea.

"Sections of demonstrators," the *Eastern Daily* reported, "became emotional, shouting anti-Japanese and anti-corruption slogans, expressing dissatisfaction over the latest move over [the disputed] Diaoyu islands [known as Senkaku in Japan] by the Japanese government, while denouncing the corrupt local authorities as 'traitors selling out the country'."

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Police assaulted a journalist from Japan's *Asahi* and confiscated his camera and equipment. Japan's consulate in Shanghai issued a protest to the Chinese government and demanded an apology.

The Chinese authorities did nothing to discourage a wave of on-line calls, motivated by anti-Japanese chauvinism, to boycott Oji paper. The *Wall Street Journal* noted: "A search for the phrase 'boycott Nepia'—the brand name of a tissue that Oji sells in China—turned up more than 100,000 posts Monday morning." One microblogger based in Jiangsu province, where Qidong is located, declared: "Little Japan, get out of my country!"

With the Chinese economy rapidly slowing, there are reports that retrenched migrant workers are returning home from coastal cities on a large-scale, because of declining export production and construction. The regime fears that any protests against the government will become a focal point of broader discontent.

Earlier this month, Shifang city in Sichuan province was the scene of a similar struggle. Tens of thousands of demonstrating residents forced the authorities to shut a multi-billion dollar copper processing project owned by a Chinese billionaire. That unrest was also driven by popular concern over health hazards and the impact on the environment (see: "Mass protests force Chinese authorities to scrap industrial project").

Despite the regime's attempt to intimidate people with massive deployments of riot police, the battle in Shifang has inspired workers and youth in other cities to take a stand against the government.

According to the state-controlled *Global Times*, the Chinese government is also suffering a "credibility crisis" after this month's floods in Beijing. The disaster exposed the regime's failure to construct proper drainage systems and other vital infrastructure. There remains widespread anger over the government's cover up of the death toll, which has been officially lifted from 37 to 77, still far less than the widely estimated 300. Higher figures, up to 1,000, are circulating among Internet users.

Referring to the Qidong protest, an editorial in the official *China Daily* warned: "A local government's lack of concern for the will of residents in its decision-making process is dangerous, especially when people's awareness of their rights and interests is on the rise."

An alarmed *Global Times* editorial said the Qidong and Shifang protests "have together left the impression that the fastest way to change a government policy is to hold a violent demonstration." It continued: "If this model is copied widely, it would be disastrous for social stability. It encourages the public to resort to radical methods to realise its demands."

The editorials underscore the anxiety within the Stalinist regime that it is sitting atop a social time bomb. The Qidong protest makes clear that the CCP bureaucracy as well as using police-state methods will not hesitate to encourage reactionary anti-Japanese sentiment to divert attention from its own responsibility for the economic and social crisis.

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