

Police crackdown on protest in western China

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A large scale demonstration last weekend in China ended in violence after it was broken up by police. The protest in the county of Linshui was in opposition to a decision by the provincial government that appeared to re-route a planned high speed railway away from Linshui and towards a neighboring city.

The demonstration began on Saturday, and continued into Sunday and was, according to eyewitnesses, initially peaceful. An estimated 20,000 to 30,000 people participated in the protest, demanding that Linshui County be included on the high speed train route as initially planned.

Linshui is located in the eastern part of Sichuan Province in southwestern China where poverty is widespread. The county is home to approximately one million people but lacks a train station or airport and is connected to the rest of China with only an expressway. Locals hope that the proposed railway would bring jobs and improved economic conditions.

The protest began when news circulated that the railway would be diverted to nearby Guang'an, the birthplace of former top Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. Many demonstrators believed that political favoritism was involved in the decision.

Protesters chanted slogans such as, "Bring back our railway," and "We want the railway to achieve development and prosperity." One protestor identified as Ms. Gan, told the UK-based *Telegraph* newspaper: "No-one organized this protest—people just came out onto the streets spontaneously."

Riot police and heavily-armed paramilitary police were dispatched to suppress the protest. A witness told the *Wall Street Journal* that violence erupted "when police began roughly handling people." Images of police wielding batons and striking people in the head were posted online along with pictures of protesters bleeding from large wounds. Photos also showed tear gas been used to disperse the crowd.

Protesters defended themselves by throwing rocks and in some cases smashed the windshields of police cars. Some reports indicated that four people had been killed. However, a local government statement posted online stated that the protest "had caused some police and ordinary people to be injured but nobody died." Officials said that 30 police officers and 38 protesters were injured.

Chinese authorities attempted to suppress news of what occurred in Linshui. Journalists were targeted for arrest. A reporting team for Al Jazeera was detained at gunpoint for several hours before being released. Their video equipment was also seized and later returned but with all memory cards erased. The Internet was taken down across the region, searches related to "Linshui" were blocked and articles and photos already posted on news sites and social media were deleted.

As of Monday, the local government reported that the "riot" was over, with 40 people arrested on Saturday and an additional 20 people on Sunday. The central government has downplayed or simply refused to comment on the protest. Following the demonstration, however, Chinese authorities have stated that no final decision has been made on the proposed railway route.

Local authorities and businesses, which will be hard hit by the routing decision, were sympathetic to the protest. However, the broad involvement of working people was driven by widespread poverty and unemployment. Many workers have been forced to migrate to larger cities, leaving behind their families, in search of employment.

Cheng Dequan, a retired teacher who lives in a village near the Linshui town center, told the *Financial Times* in early May, "The village school is still there, but there are only two grades and maybe ten students. They can't keep it going. The parents have all gone to work in cities."

An article in the *Financial Times* this week

highlighted the economic divide within China between the fastest growing and more backward provinces such as Sichuan that has been accentuated by the current slowdown in China.

Wigram Capital founder Rodney Jones told the newspaper: “The downturn is being felt hardest in the poorer provinces—which have the biggest deficits and have relied the most on investment for growth.” While the national growth figure was 5.8 percent for the first quarter, Jones estimated that the economy actually shrank in 11 of the country’s 31 provinces.

The article focussed on China’s northeast, once an industrial center, but now one of the country’s most economically devastated regions. Over the past few years, its economy was reliant on property investment, but housing prices and construction are now declining.

Chen Liyong, now a taxi driver after losing his job at a cement company last year, said of life in the city of Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang Province, “Our economy here has relied almost entirely on building housing but everyone who can afford an apartment already has one and we don’t have anyone moving here from other places.”

Last month more than 30 taxi drivers drank poison in a busy shopping area in Beijing in a protest against the desperate conditions they face. According to police, the drivers all survived and were from the city of Suifenhe in Heilongjiang Province.

In the first quarter, 20 of China’s 31 provinces experienced growth of less than 8 percent—the level long regarded in Beijing as necessary to prevent rising unemployment and social unrest. The social crisis is likely to worsen as China faces its worst economic slowdown in 25 years and may not even reach the projected 7 percent growth rate. Longer term, growth is expected to decrease to 6.1 percent between 2016 and 2020.

Provincial authorities in Sichuan, where people have long suffered from poverty, are touting recent memoranda of understanding on investment with South Korea and Singapore, as having the potential to bring economic development. However, as last weekend’s protest in Linshui county underscores, there are also vast disparities even within provinces.

The Linshui protest is also a sharp indication of the explosive social tensions conditions that are being generated by declining growth rates.



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