Chinese regime seeks to censor outrage over Tianjin disaster

James Cogan
18 August 2015

With the death toll of last Wednesday's explosions in the Tanggu port district of the city of Tianjin passing 114, the Chinese regime is seeking to censor the widespread discussion taking place on the Internet, social media in particular, on the causes of the disaster. The official news agency Xinhua reported over the weekend that authorities have shut down 50 websites and suspended 360 social media accounts for allegedly posting "rumours" that caused "adverse social panic."

Other reports indicate that posts, video and photos of the disaster site were being deleted within hours from major social media sites such as RenRen, Kaixin001 and 51.com, which have similarities to Facebook, and Twitter-style sites, such as Weibo and WeChat. A hashtag appeared labelling the government and its response "A real life Pinocchio" with another calling for "Tanggu explosion truth." Some people have reportedly been arrested for their critical commentary.

A major factor in the popular anger and suspicion of the official reports is the reality that a catastrophe of similar or greater dimensions could occur any day, in any number of Chinese cities and towns. The same unchecked development of the capitalist market that has transformed China into the centre of global manufacturing—and which generates vast profits for the international and national business elite—has created a perilous environment that kills, maims or sickens millions of people each year.

While suppressing wider discussion, the government and state agencies have felt compelled to release damning information regarding the violations of safety standards, inadequate emergency services and the concealment of the hazards that contributed to the Tanggu explosions and the death toll. A crude damage control exercise is underway, with the authorities seeking to focus blame solely on the management of Rui Hai International Logistics, whose warehouse was the site of the explosion.

On Sunday, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited some of the injured and theatrically declared: "We must thoroughly investigate and hold accountable those responsible. We must give an answer for families of the victims, an answer for all residents of Tianjin, an answer for all Chinese people, and an answer for history."

The Associated Press reported yesterday that the country's national fire chief, Niu Hueguang, stated on the China Fire Services' official website that Rui Hai was storing 3,000 tonnes of 40 different types of hazardous chemicals. Niu listed 800 tonnes of ammonium nitrate, which is used in explosives, and about 500 tonnes of potassium nitrate, used in rocket fuel and fireworks.

He Shushan, Tianjin's deputy mayor, confirmed yesterday the widely reported fact that Rui Hai was also storing up to 600 tonnes of sodium cyanide, a compound used in gold mining that reacts violently when exposed to water, producing lethal hydrogen cyanide gas. Other chemicals on site included calcium carbide and toluene diisocyanate, which Greenpeace noted in a press release "react violently with water and reactive chemicals, with risk of explosion."

The variety and quantity of chemicals in the warehouse has produced an outcry, as thousands of people were living within 600 metres to one kilometre of the site, and over 90,000 within five kilometres. Residents have been widely cited in the international press making clear they were never informed and that no drills were conducted as to how they should respond to chemical leaks, let alone explosions. The port fire brigade and police were also reportedly unaware.

The Chinese government has deployed a specialised

© World Socialist Web Site

214-strong military unit to the scene to address chemical contamination, the scope of which has not been definitively revealed. Waste water at the explosion site has been reported as showing levels of sodium cyanide at 27 times acceptable limits, though both government tests and independent testing by Greenpeace have not found dangerous levels of toxins in the air. Small fires and explosions at the site were reported on Monday, possibly related to the clean-up efforts.

Family members of missing people and local residents whose property was damaged are gathering each morning outside the Tianjin hotel where press conferences are being held to update the international media, holding hand-written placards and banners. Signs have included, “Either we see them alive or we see their bodies” and “We victims demand: Government, buy back our houses.”

The protests resulted in public confirmation yesterday that 95 people are listed as “missing,” including 85 of the 1,000 firefighters who were sent to combat a blaze in the Rui Hui warehouse with no idea of the lethal and explosive substances present at the scene. At least 21 firefighters have been confirmed dead. According to the *New York Times*, a police officer monitoring a protest on Saturday morning said: “Not a single police officer death has been reported. Everyone from our whole police station is gone.”

The death toll must therefore be expected to rise sharply. At least 721 injured people are still being treated in hospital, with at least 58 categorised as in a critical or serious condition.

Information has also emerged that the firefighters were poorly paid and equipped temporary contract workers, with no specialised training in chemical fires. Yang Jie, the father of a missing firefighter, told the *Financial Times* his son was paid just 3,500 renminbi per month ($US550) and was sometimes sent by his contracting company to work as a security guard in local shopping malls.

The regime’s attempts to control what is reported have failed to prevent serious questions emerging over the role of high-ranking officials and members of the Communist Party elite in the disaster. In a report published today, *Time* cited *Caijing*, a Chinese business publication, as naming the son of the former police chief of Tianjin as a stakeholder in Rui Hui International Logistics.

Time also noted that the rapid development after 2007 of Tianjin’s Binhai industrial zone, which includes the port, took place under the direct control of Zhang Gaoli, who now holds the position of vice premier and is part of the top seven-member Politburo Standing Committee of the CCP.

Questions are raised as to whether Zhang Gaoli has any links to Rui Hui, or, more importantly, the companies that it supplies. From 2002 to 2007, Gaoli was governor of the province of Shandong, the centre of China’s gold mining industry. Chinese gold production has been soaring over recent years, growing another 8 percent in the first six months of 2015 alone, and increasing demand for chemicals such as sodium cyanide.

From late 2007 to 2012, Gaoli served as CCP secretary of Tianjin, overseeing the massive expansion of the city’s industry. Since being elevated to vice premier, he has been placed in overall control of the plans to develop Beijing, Tianjin and Heibei province into a megacity of 130 million people by 2020.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site