

# Chinese official, company managers under investigation after Tianjin disaster

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The fall-out from last Wednesday's explosions in the city of Tianjin has begun to reach into the upper echelons of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime. Yesterday, state media outlets, including the *People's Daily* and Xinhua news agency, announced that the country's national director of the State Administration of Work Safety, Yang Dongliang, had been removed from his position and was "under investigation" for "severe violation of discipline and law." Prior to his appointment to a post in the central government, Yang was the vice mayor of Tianjin from 2001 to 2012.

As recently as Sunday, Yang was in Tianjin, accompanying Premier Li Keqiang and an array of top officials on visits to hospitals to demonstrate the regime's concern for the victims. More significantly, he was part of the committee commissioned to preside over the investigations into the disaster.

The official death toll from the explosions remains at 114, many of whom have not been identified. At least 57 emergency workers were among those killed. At least 85 people are still listed as "missing," including 75 firefighters who were sent to extinguish a blaze at the warehouse with no knowledge of the explosive substances inside. The majority of the firefighters were poorly-paid contract workers with little or no training.

Despite the government's closure of websites and shutting down of social media accounts, a widespread discussion is continuing on how the disaster was able to take place and, above all, who is politically responsible.

While no information has been provided on any link between Yang's removal and the explosions, it is strongly suggested by the timing and the prominent reporting of his political demise. State media has revealed that the company operating the warehouse where the explosions took place, Rui Hui International

Logistics, was only granted a license to store hazardous chemicals in June, after operating without any authorisation for the prior eight months.

The high-profile reportage of investigations and likely arrests is aimed at stemming public recriminations against the government. Initial attempts to blame Rui Hui management alone were greeted on social media sites with derision and anger. The nexus of corruption between state officials and business permeating Chinese society is common knowledge.

Ten directors and managers of Rui Hui are under investigation and have reportedly been under house arrest since August 13. On Monday, China's Supreme People's Procuratorate—the country's highest prosecuting agency—announced that it was also investigating bribery charges against two Tianjin port officials. On the weekend, *Caijing*, a Chinese business journal, published unconfirmed claims that the son of the former police chief of Tianjin is a stakeholder in Rui Hui.

Rui Hui's violation of Chinese safety standards was so flagrant that it is highly unlikely its activities were unknown to authorities. Chinese Central Television (CCTV), the national state broadcaster, reported that such chemical storage facilities "should be at least 1,000 metres away from public buildings, arterial roads and industrial and mining enterprises." It noted that Rui Hui's "46,000-square kilometre warehouse which stored a range of deadly chemicals... was only 500 metres away from a railway line and 600 metres from residential buildings."

CCTV highlighted that residential buildings with 5,600 households, and within the 1,000-metre zone, had been constructed in 2010, one year before Rui Hui began operations at Tianjin port. Some 90,000 people were living within five kilometres of the explosion.

According to China's Ministry of Public Security, Rui Hui was storing 40 different substances, including 800 tonnes of ammonium nitrate and 500 tonnes of potassium nitrate, both used in explosives, and 700 tonnes of sodium cyanide, which is used in gold mining. Other chemicals in the warehouse included large quantities of calcium carbide and toluene diisocyanate—which react violently when heated or exposed to water.

The explosions have affected some 1,700 businesses in the city. As many as 10,000 imported cars were incinerated or damaged. Fitch Ratings has published an initial estimate of the damages bill to insurance companies at more than \$US1.5 billion.

Residents whose apartments were damaged in the blast have held protests demanding that the government buy their properties. Many do not want to return. Public fears have been heightened by uncertainty as to the extent of contamination in the area.

Government media has been permitted to report that monitoring stations are recording elevated levels of sodium cyanide at some locations and in waste water discharges. After rain fell overnight, photos were published showing white foam appearing on city streets.

Indicative of the fears in the regime over the extent of public outrage, an editorial in yesterday's *Global Times* advised: "Answering every question that society cares about should become a duty for every level of officials and it should be implemented as far as possible. A single slow reaction can lead to rumours running riot. And in turn, public confidence in the government will continue to fall."

Another comment, published by the *Global Times* and *People's Daily*, appealed to the Chinese population: "[W]hat is needed most is mutual understanding... the public should trust the government wants to do a good job. Blindly questioning and denying the government work is not a rational approach to the issue... For the time being, trust is the most precious thing."

The question is: how far up the Chinese hierarchy will the search for scapegoats go in order to dispel public suspicions of an official cover-up? The real cause of such disasters lies in the breakneck expansion of Chinese capitalism that places profit ahead of the health and lives of the working class.



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