

Chinese officials, company executives detained over Tianjin explosion

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Chinese authorities formally detained a dozen people on Thursday over the devastating explosions in the port city of Tianjin on August 12. These include the chairman, vice-chairman and three deputy managers of Tianjin Rui Hai International Logistics, the company whose warehouse was storing the deadly chemicals that fuelled the blast.

The same day, the Supreme People's Procuratorate, the highest prosecuting body in the country, announced that it was investigating 10 officials and port executives for "dereliction of duty" and one for "abuse of power" in relation to the explosion.

The arrests and investigations mark an escalation of the attempts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime to appease widespread anger over the disaster by scapegoating local officials. It came the same day as the official death toll from the blast was increased to 145. That figure reached 146 yesterday, with at least 28 people still listed as missing. Over 500 of the more than 700 people who were injured are still being treated in hospital.

Since the explosion it has been revealed that the Rui Hai warehouse was storing some 2,500 tonnes of hazardous chemicals. These included 700 tonnes of sodium cyanide, more than 70 times the legal limit. The chemical is highly poisonous. Other hazardous materials included 500 tonnes of potassium nitrate and 800 tonnes of ammonium nitrate, both of which are explosive.

Under Chinese law, it is illegal to store dangerous chemicals within a one-kilometre radius of residential and public buildings. The Rui Hai warehouse was located in close proximity to high-density apartment blocks and workers' dormitories. It received approval in 2012 as a result of the ties between its owners and the city's political establishment. The storage facility

was operating without an official permit between October 2014 and June this year.

Some of the officials under investigation are Zheng Qingyue, Tianjin Port president; Wu Dai, Tianjin transport commission chairman; Gao Huaiyou, Tianjin deputy work safety administration chief; Wang Jiapeng, Tianjin deputy customs chief; and Wang Jinwen, deputy inspector with the Ministry of Transport. According to some reports, they have been effectively placed under detention by state prosecutors.

A statement by the procuratorate accused city officials of issuing illegal clearing permits to the port company, allowing it to conduct unlawful business operations, and failing to respond to the safety threat posed by the company.

In a sign that the fallout from the Tianjin explosion may be extending into higher echelons of the CCP regime, State Administration of Work Safety head Yang Dongliang was sacked on Wednesday, accused of "serious breaches of discipline and the law." Yan, who was stood down in the aftermath of the blast, was vice mayor of Tianjin until 2012.

The regime's panicked response to the disaster was further indicated by a report in the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) yesterday, based on unnamed sources, which claimed that the highest levels of the CCP leadership were "infuriated with the Tianjin government's attempts to underplay the death toll" in the immediate aftermath of the explosions.

Tianjin authorities initially claimed that just 14 people had died in the blasts, but quickly raised that figure to 44 as the scope of the explosions became apparent. According to the SCMP, a Tianjin police source claimed that officers had been instructed to remove bodies from the scene so they were not added to the official death toll.

The CCP's propaganda department allegedly held a meeting with selected media less than a week after the explosions, at which state journalists were encouraged to look into Rui Hai International Logistics. The SCMP's source stated: "The top leadership of the party was dissatisfied with how the Tianjin authority handled the blasts at first, and that's why we have state media digging into the company."

Coverage of the disaster has been tightly controlled by the regime, with 50 websites and hundreds of social media pages shut down or censored for raising questions about the explosions. The censorship has failed to prevent widespread discussions of the blasts, however. It is estimated that one hashtag related to the disaster on the Chinese Twitter-equivalent Sina Weibo has been viewed 3.32 billion times.

A major factor in the mounting anger over the Tianjin disaster is broad recognition that the conditions that led to the explosion exist in cities throughout China.

Last week, Greenpeace identified warehouses storing dangerous chemicals close to residential areas in the major port cities of Guangzhou, Shanghai, Qingdao and Ningbo. Other warehouses operated by the state-owned Sinochem group store dangerous chemicals in Tianjin in proximity to highways and children's kindergartens. In an attempt to quell concerns, Chinese authorities are conducting "inspections" at chemical factories and warehouses throughout the country.

At the same time, the regime is seeking to damp down outrage over damage to apartments and homes in Tianjin, which has been the subject of ongoing public protests. *China Daily* reported on Thursday that official inspectors have given 11 of the 12 worst-affected apartment blocks in the Tianjin Binhai New Area the highest safety rating, and claimed that their structural integrity was sound.

There are also widespread fears over the health and environmental implications of the disaster. Last week, it was discovered that water near the blast's site contained 350 times the standard level of cyanide. Thousands of dead fish also washed up on the city's shores. Contaminated dirt from the site will reportedly be moved to an enormous container some four kilometres away.

On Friday, China's Environment Minister Chen Jining pledged continuous checks on pollution in the city. Attempting to allay concerns over the limited

information provided to residents, Chen declared that his ministry would "release monitoring data to the public in a timely manner and accurately."

Underlying the CCP's nervous response to the Tianjin disaster is the deepening crisis of the entire regime. The ongoing economic slowdown and unprecedented turbulence on the country's super-inflated stock markets, together with the growing gulf between rich and poor, is raising questions about the political legitimacy of the regime and the entire existing set-up in the minds of millions of Chinese workers and sections of the middle class.



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