

Chinese industrial zone engulfed by waste landslide

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A massive wall of mud, rock and construction waste engulfed an industrial area of the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen on Sunday, destroying at least 33 buildings and covering about 380,000 square metres under 10 metres of debris.

No deaths have been confirmed to date, but as of yesterday 85 people were missing. Despite the efforts of some 2,900 rescuers operating with heavy machinery and specialist rescue equipment, only seven survivors had been found. A rescue worker told the Xinhua news agency that the conditions were “extremely difficult” as mud kept pouring in to fill up excavation sites.

Local residents told the *South China Morning Post* that the number of missing was “definitely much higher” than the official count. A woman whose parents and brother were buried at home said that ten people, including seven children, lived next door and none had escaped. “Nobody reported these missing cases on their behalf,” she said.

Sixteen people, including a seven-year-old child, were hospitalised and in a stable condition. Around 900 people have been evacuated to temporary shelters. Survivors told the media that they had little warning or time to flee.

The area on the outskirts of Shenzhen known as Guangming New District is the site of many small and medium-sized businesses. Three industrial parks were affected by the landslide, which damaged, buried or toppled 14 factories, three workers’ dormitories, a canteen, 13 low-rise buildings and two office blocks.

The landslide also severed a major pipeline supplying natural gas from Central Asia to Hong Kong. The China National Petroleum Corporation, which has dispatched workers to construct a temporary pipeline link around the affected area, denied reports in the state-run media of an explosion.

This landslide was not a natural disaster, but resulted from the collapse of a mountain of industrial waste piled up just a few hundred metres from the boundaries of one of the industrial parks. According to the Ministry of Land and Natural Resources, the dump of earth and construction rubbish, as high as 20-storeys in parts, was too large and angled too steeply, making it unstable.

According to the *South China Morning Post*, documents show that the Hongao Construction Waste Dump, on the site of a former quarry, was operating illegally. Its initial 12 months approval in February 2014 had run out. Inspectors found the site still operating in July and not following agreed safety procedures. Rather than shut down the dump, the local authorities ordered the operator to make improvements and reapply for a licence in September, which it failed to do.

The newspaper reported that people living in the area had repeatedly complained to authorities about the dump as it looked increasingly unstable. The complaints were ignored and the number of trucks carrying waste to the site increased in recent months. Despite promises of a crackdown, the authorities took no action to shut the dump down in October.

A professor at Shanghai’s Tongji University specialising in waste management told the *South Morning China Post*: “The proper way of handling construction waste is to recycle or bury. Levelling or piling should only be used when there was no other option.” He said that there were no national standards for burying waste and that the highly-piled Shenzhen waste dump was not an isolated case.

The disaster epitomises the unbridled capitalist exploitation that underpins China’s rapid economic expansion over the past three decades. Shenzhen was

just a fishing town close to Hong Kong in the 1970s before it was transformed into one of the country's first Special Economic Zones for foreign investors. It was one of four cities visited by the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in 1992 as part of his "Southern Tour" designed to accelerate pro-market "reform" and transform China into a vast cheap labour platform.

Today Shenzhen is a wealthy city with a population of 10 million. Its frenzied expansion as a huge manufacturing hub has been built on the gross exploitation of the working class, generous tax breaks and other concessions for investors, and lax regulation and enforcement on everything from building codes to environmental and safety standards.

The Taiwanese-owned corporation, Foxconn, operates a vast industrial complex in Shenzhen employing some 400,000 workers making electronic goods for international brands such as Apple, Dell and Hewlett-Packard. Its regimented and oppressive work practices only came to light after a spate of suicide attempts by workers in 2010.

Shenzhen is not alone. In August, more than 140 people were killed and hundreds more injured in a series of massive explosions in the northern port of Tianjin. Tianjin Rui Hai International Logistics was illegally storing dangerous chemicals in a warehouse in close proximity to residential areas and public buildings. While the company initially received approval in 2012 as a result of ties between its owners and the city's political establishment; it continued to operate after October 2014 without an official permit.

The Chinese authorities reacted to the explosion by making a series of arrests, including of company executives, and announcing investigations of officials in an effort to deflect widespread outrage over the wanton disregard for public health and safety. The head of the State Administration of Work Safety, Yang Dongliang, was sacked for "serious breaches of discipline and the law" and placed under investigation. He had been vice mayor of Tianjin until 2012.

The Chinese leadership has responded to the Shenzhen landslide in a cynical, pro-forma fashion. President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang issued a statement exhorting rescuers to find survivors. As questions, concerns and criticisms mount, scapegoats will be found on whom to pin the blame and deflect attention from the underlying causes that lie in the

unfettered operation of the capitalist market over which Xi and Li preside.



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