Collapse of quarantine building in China exposes public anger over Beijing's COVID-19 measures

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The March 7 collapse of a hotel in China being used as a quarantine center for people possibly infected with the COVID-19 coronavirus has triggered public anger over the measures taken by the regime in Beijing to curb the virus.

Seventy-one people were inside the Xinjia Hotel, in the city of Quanzhou, Fujian Province, when it collapsed. The death toll reached 29 last Thursday as the final victim was recovered from the rubble, the authorities said. All those in quarantine had previously tested negative for the virus.

The exact cause of the collapse is still not known, but the building's first floor had been undergoing renovations. The building was opened in 2013, but its third, fourth and fifth floors were converted into a hotel in 2018. Construction workers reported a deformed pillar minutes before the collapse. The building's owner, surnamed Yang, was summoned for questioning by the police.

People expressed outrage at the hotel's collapse and solidarity with those trapped. On the evening of March 7, the accident was the top trending topic on the social networking site Weibo, China's version of Twitter. One person wrote: "The Quanzhou government must be scrutinized! This is not a natural disaster. This is a man-made disaster!" Another wrote: "Gravely hold those responsible accountable."

This anger is being fueled by the fact that millions in China have been forced to endure lockdowns of entire cities and forced quarantines. Despite these measures, nearly 81,000 people have been infected in China, and more than 3,000 have died, although the spread is said to be slowing, with just eight new cases officially reported on Thursday.

On Weibo, another person contrasted the feelings of being quarantined to being trapped in rubble: "I feel despair after getting locked into a room for just one hour. I can't imagine those people trapped under rocks for many hours. Hope they are all surviving and strong."

Building collapses and industrial accidents are common in capitalist China, where companies often cut corners and ignore safety regulations to inflate profits. Last May, a building in Shanghai collapsed, killing 10 construction workers. It was also undergoing renovations.

Many people on social media referred to the hotel as another example of "tofu-dreg construction," meaning shoddy work. This term gained wide use after the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, when several schools collapsed as a result of poor construction, leading to the deaths of thousands of children.

The collapse of the hotel threatens to crack the narrative that the measures taken by Beijing to curb COVID-19 should be emulated. On Tuesday, President Xi Jinping visited Wuhan, where the virus is believed to have originated, and claimed that the spread of the disease had been halted in the city.

However, a building collapse or other disaster could easily contribute to the further spread of COVID-19, for example, by exposing rescue workers to infected patients or preventing people from accessing medical care.

These types of construction accidents demonstrate the subordination of healthcare and other social services to the capitalist market, which Beijing defends. This greatly exacerbates any catastrophe, whether arising from a new virus, earthquake or other disaster.

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Beijing is working to deflect criticism from inside China to prevent an explosion of social anger, as well as counter criticism from the US that is of an entirely different and right-wing character. Beijing's state publishers recently put out a book for this purpose titled, *A Battle Against Epidemic: China Combating COVID-19 in 2020*. Social media users in China have circulated pictures of the book, denouncing it as "totally shameless."

Wuhan's new party secretary, Wang Zhonglin, also earned scorn by demanding residents of the city show gratitude to President Xi and the Chinese Communist Party. Journalist Chu Zhaoxin retorted: "You are a public servant, and your job is to serve the people. Now the people you serve are broken, the dead are still cold, and the tears of the living have not yet dried. The sick have not yet recovered, and much of their dissatisfaction is completely reasonable."

Wang seemed to be responding, at least in part, to Wuhan residents who denounced the handling of the quarantine during Vice Premier Sun Chunlan's visit to the city the previous week. As he toured a residential compound, people shouted, "Fake! Fake! It's all fake!" according to the *Los Angeles Times*. Residents said they had been neglected while the compound's management orchestrated a phony clean-up and grocery deliveries shortly before Sun's visit.

However, China is under pressure from the United States government, which is using the virus outbreak as a pretext for ramping up tensions with Beijing.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said last week: "Remember, this is the Wuhan coronavirus that's caused this, and the information that we got at the front end of this thing wasn't perfect and has led us now to a place where much of the challenge we face today has put us behind the curve."

On Tuesday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang criticized Pompeo, saying: "Despite the fact that the WHO (World Health Organization) has officially named this novel type of coronavirus, [a] certain American politician, disrespecting science and the WHO decision, jumped at the first chance to stigmatize China and Wuhan with it. We condemn this despicable practice."

Washington is similarly trying to deflect fear and anger in the United States as the COVID-19 outbreak grows and it becomes clear that the US government is completely unprepared. A number of American politicians have taken to calling COVID-19 the "Wuhan virus" or the "Chinese coronavirus."

Pompeo claimed on Monday that this was being done to counter propaganda from Beijing. In reality, Washington is exploiting the health crisis to escalate its war drive against China.

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