

Forced home demolitions fuel discontent in China's Shandong Province

A correspondent
28 August 2020

Over the past year, as part of a national land use policy, the Shandong provincial government has been carrying out large-scale forced house demolitions in rural areas throughout the province, provoking defiant protests by farmers.

Many residents have been driven out of their homes and forced into “new rural communities” in nearby areas. These are supposed to be communities planned by the government, bringing the residents of several villages together.

But, as shown in some widely-circulated photos and videos, many villagers have not been resettled before their homes were demolished, forcing them to build makeshift temporary houses.

Although the focus of this current confrontation is Shandong Province, it flows from rural land planning instructions issued by the Chinese government in May 2019. Two months later, the Shandong administration proposed large-scale “village mergers,” with plans to demolish about 14,000 villages by the end of 2020 in the first phase.

Supposedly, the purpose is to promote urbanisation and improve the rural living environment. In reality, by moving villagers into existing towns or newly-built housing with a smaller footprint, the debt-laden government frees up land that it can then sell.

Shandong has long been regarded as one of China's main agricultural regions. According to official statistics in 2019, nearly 40 percent of its population was in rural areas. In a government report this May, the level of urbanisation was 8 percentage points lower than that of neighbouring Jiangsu Province and 10 percentage points lower than that of Guangdong Province.

The Shandong provincial government says this is a “disgrace” that must be changed. In reality, regional “urbanisation data” is often regarded as an important evaluation item for the promotion of officials.

According to reports, after the villagers' homes were demolished, they had to pay large sums of money before moving into their new buildings, and faced more expensive living costs.

As revealed in an article in *China News Weekly* on June 10, many local governments implemented “demolition first, then resettlement” policies, causing villagers to lose their homes. When a reporter asked some displaced residents who had circulated photos and videos, when they could move into a newly-built community, no one in the village knew the exact answer.

Villagers who refused to sign agreements were subjected to intimidation. Often, villagers opposed to forced demolitions were beaten.

In one video, a woman showed her house after its demolition. The furniture and household items were violently thrown out of the house, and covered in mud. She cried and said: “This is my home, not a dump.”

On June 21, an article titled “The Real Situation of Village Merger in Shandong” was published in the *South Review*, triggering public concern.

Li Shang, a resident of Lijia Village, Linyi, which was demolished last October, said the resettlement buildings were four kilometres away from the village, and did not provide decent living conditions. Moreover, because the compensation for demolition was very small, villagers had to pay fees to move into the new buildings. Many villagers had refused to move. Li Shang's parents had stayed behind at his home, but faced harassment such as the digging up of their fields, artificial destruction of crops, power and water cuts, and the smashing of windows and doors.

Unable to tolerate this intimidation, Li Shang's parents moved out on June 11 to join their son, who was working in the city. At noon on June 13, Li Shang's house was demolished without any notice. Li Shang had reported this to the police, called for help, and petitioned, but to no

avail.

Yuan Zhen, in Yuanjia Village, suffered even more threatening treatment. In mid-April, at a suddenly-convened village meeting, the residents were told that the village would be demolished. Subsequently, a propaganda group of more than 100 government personnel entered the village, seeking to force the villagers to sign agreements to demolition, without even saying where and when a new community would be built.

Yuan Zhen's family and 23 others opposed the signing. On May 30, government officials came to her house again and started smashing the door. With her two children crying with fright, Yuan Zhen was forced to open the door but was immediately taken into a car by six government officials. They confiscated her mobile phone and drove around for a while to prevent anyone from following the car, then took her to a government office, where officials spoke to her for 16 hours.

The officials said "village merger" was a "national policy" and opposition to demolition would affect her marriage and her children's school and work, as well as their marriage. Yuan Zhen's family had immediately called the police but when they arrived at the government office, the officials asked her to sign a certificate and said: "This is not illegal detention, but 'political work.'"

When Yuan Zhen asked the officials where and when a new community would be built, she was told residents could move in during August. Yuan Zhen retorted that the village next door had been demolished two years earlier for the construction of a reservoir, and the villagers still had not been properly resettled.

In the end, Yuan Zhen still refused to sign a demolition agreement, but felt powerless in the face of the government's harsh rhetoric and intense "political work."

On June 27, confronted by continued protests by farmers, sparking wider criticisms, the government suspended the relevant policies, but did not stop the program. Liu Jiayi, the Shandong Province chief executive, told reporters: "We will stop the demolition in areas with more controversy, but not all of them—it depends mainly on the willingness of the villagers."

Such a statement often means the suspension of demolition only so that "political work" can continue until villagers "agree" to demolition. Many villagers said that in areas with serious protests, demolition was suspended, but the demolition debris had not been cleared, so villagers could not return to live.

On July 2, an article titled "How should Shandong restart the merger of villages" appeared in *Faren* news, an

official publication, again indicating that the program is continuing.

Some media outlets have questioned the legality of forced demolitions and reported suspicions that local governments were using the land policies to increase their fiscal revenue.

On June 10, in *China News Weekly*'s report on the "village merger" program in Dong'e County, an official said the local government had a cooperative relationship with the Shandong Land Development Group because it could obtain higher prices when trading land. "For example, in the demolition of a certain village, if 150 units of construction land are obtained, it means that after subtracting the 30 units required for resettlement, at least 120 units of land can be traded with the company to obtain huge profits."

In other words, land obtained by demolishing farmers' houses is being sold to developers to increase government income.

As a result of the economic downturn in recent years, the Shandong provincial government and local governments all have huge debts, making the transfer of land to profiteers quite common. Dezhou City, one Shandong's main cities, for example, had a ratio of government debt to general public budget revenue as high as 300 percent at the end of 2017.

This is a national crisis. As early as 2015, a report showed that the debt ratio of more than 100 municipal-level administrative units and over 400 county-level administrative units nationwide exceeded 100 percent, and warned of government bankruptcies.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a large number of migrant workers have lost their jobs and returned to the countryside, so more serious social conflicts may occur. The houses kept by migrant workers in rural areas were treated as "vacant houses" and subject to demolition and confiscation.

The resistance of peasants to the forced demolition of their villages is just one indication of the mounting social tensions being produced by the worsening social and economic crisis in China.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)