

Antiwar protests in China despite police intimidation

By John Chan
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Even as it proclaims China a “peace-loving” nation “opposed” to the US-led invasion of Iraq, the Stalinist regime in Beijing is determined to block the growth of antiwar protests.

According to a recent government survey, 75 percent of the population is opposed to the war but only a handful of people have been allowed to publicly voice their opposition. Three demonstrations were held in Beijing on March 30—each subject to severe restrictions on numbers, venues and slogans.

The first took place at a remote venue—Chaoyang Park in eastern Beijing—where it had been directed by city police officials. The conditions imposed on the protest were so onerous that the organisers called it off. More than 100 protestors turned up at the park anyway. They were met by several hundred police who ushered them past journalists and seized their banners. Several protestors were detained for questioning.

The protest was organised via the Internet. More than 3,000 people signed an antiwar petition and 500 registered their names for the planned demonstration. The group intended to march through Beijing to the US embassy with slogans such as “American forces out of Iraq” and “Against Great Power politics and hegemonism”. But the police flatly opposed the proposal.

The organisers filed a formal application to hold the rally with the Beijing Public Security Bureau on March 25. During four days of protracted negotiations and questioning, the police cut the number of permitted participants from 100 to just 40, curtailed the duration from five hours to forty minutes and banned speeches or the use of PA systems. Police objected to the use of email, demanded a complete list of names and, at the last minute, changed the starting time.

After calling off the rally, the organisers issued a

statement saying: “Under these new restrictions, a demonstration, limited to such a small size, short duration and small space, would be deprived of any public impact and educational value. Therefore, we had no choice but to cancel the march.” They indicated they were considering filing a legal suit against the police.

The second protest involved just 20 students at China’s prestigious Beijing University, who were prevented by police from leaving the campus. Five students briefly held up letters spelling out “No War” in English. Other students unfurled a banner declaring “Oppose War, don’t take peace for granted” in Chinese. “I’m against the war, we all are,” a female student told the media. “America’s too ferocious.”

Associated Press reported that the rally was kept under “strict surveillance by dozens of police”. Plainclothes officers circled the tiny group of students, “filming and photographing” those assembled. The authorities have a particular reason to be nervous as the university played a prominent role in the May-June 1989 student protest movement at Tiananmen Square.

The third “legal” protest was a march of some 100 foreigners resident in Beijing past the British and US embassies. The organisers had originally asked the police for a permit for 300, but only 150 were allowed. Just prior to the march, a public security officer read out a list of rules, including: “Do not throw anything at the embassy. When it is over, leave this area rapidly.” Police blocked local Chinese who attempted to join the march.

On the same day, two spontaneous antiwar rallies involving a few young Chinese were held in the city’s busy commercial districts. Police immediately stepped in and arrested at least six people.

Several small protests in the major industrial cities of

China's southern Guangdong Province were met with police repression. At the Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, more than 1,000 students joined an antiwar protest but police ordered them to stay on campus.

Most of the state-owned media blacked out the protests. The state-run Xinhua news agency adopted a slightly different strategy, absurdly claiming the protests showed backing for the government. "Cadres and masses in different parts of the country have expressed their support for the government's stand on the Iraqi issue and they appeal for an end of the war," it declared.

In fact, the police response to these small-scale antiwar rallies demonstrates the unbridgeable gulf between the democratic and social aspirations of the Chinese masses and the pro-imperialist regime in Beijing.

The Stalinist bureaucrats cannot tolerate any public rallies—even if they are in line with their own stated policies. They fear that protests against the US invasion of Iraq could meet up with hostility to the social devastation being caused by the government's economic restructuring policies on behalf of US and other foreign investors.

Kang Xiaoguang, a Chinese researcher from the official Chinese Academy of Social Sciences told the *New York Times* on March 10 that the new Chinese leadership will "face growing pressure and resistance-strikes, collective petitions, explosions and acts of violence. All this public discontent threatens security and stability and may force concessions."

The suppression of antiwar protests confirms that the "concessions" being considered by newly-installed President Hu Jintao will be token only. The new leaders will not hesitate to use the same methods as the old leadership of Jiang Zemin and Li Peng, which crushed the demonstrations of students and workers in May-June 1989.

Under these conditions, it is significant that the antiwar protests went ahead at all. It points to a renewed willingness on the part of Chinese students, academics and others, fuelled by anger over the war in Iraq, to challenge the Stalinist bureaucracy and its repressive methods.