

Another angry protest in China

By Carol Divjak
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Social tensions in China are taking on an increasingly explosive form. A riot by 10,000 people triggered by a car accident in the city of Chizhou in Anhui province is the latest case to be reported. Around 3 p.m. on June 26, a Toyota sedan hit a teenage student as he was riding a bike. As the student and driver began to argue, three men emerged from the car and along with the driver began to beat up the student.

A group of taxi drivers tried to help the injured student, insisting on compensation from the driver, who is the owner of a local private hospital. In response, the driver ordered his thugs to attack the taxi drivers with knives. He openly boasted that, even if someone was killed, he would get away with the crime by paying a bribe of 300,000 yuan (\$US36,000).

Police arrived on the scene but only escorted the driver and his thugs away. Onlookers were left stunned and angry. Many were outraged at the arrogance of the driver and the indifference of the police to ordinary working people. The incident reinforced their daily experience of the contempt of the newly rich and officialdom towards the lives of the poor.

Word of the incident soon spread to the working class suburbs of the city and by 6 p.m. thousands of people surrounded the local police station. They demanded the police hand over the driver and his thugs, who at that stage had not been charged with any offence, and then flipped over, smashed and torched the Toyota sedan and three police cars.

Firefighters who arrived on the scene quickly fled when confronted by the angry crowd. Police stepped in but were beaten back by the protesters hurling rocks and firecrackers. Power was cut off to the police station, windows broken and firecrackers were thrown inside. The protesters looted a nearby supermarket, partly owned by the Toyota driver. Around midnight, the provincial police chief arrived along with 700 paramilitary police officers in full riot gear and

dispersed the protest.

In a press conference on June 28, the Chinese foreign ministry acknowledged that a riot had taken place and would be handled in “accordance with the law”. In reality, the police unleashed a reign of terror. Martial law was declared and house-to-house searches were conducted. The police arrested anyone without an ID card, urban residential permit or work permit, especially targeting rural migrant workers.

According to the Xinhua news agency, 10 people have been arrested. The city government issued an emergency statement, declaring that the protest was triggered by “a few illegal elements”—a crude attempt to stir up hostility towards “illegal” rural workers. Rural migrants to cities are required to hold a special permit and are routinely treated as second-class citizens by police and officials.

The angry eruption is a symptom of broad popular sentiment. Chizhou is typical of many Chinese cities in poverty-stricken, interior provinces such as Anhui. Unlike centres of economic boom like Shanghai, Chizhou and its 1.54 million inhabitants have very few opportunities.

The city’s economy is largely based around peasant agriculture and some remaining state-owned enterprises. Rural incomes have stagnated. According to the city government website, only 6,080 of the tens of thousands of laid-off workers have found jobs last year. The official unemployment rate in the city is 4 percent—widely considered to be a gross understatement.

The riot in Chizhou is only one of many spontaneous protests. A similar incident took place last October in Wangzhou city in Sichuan, another interior province. A government official viciously attacked a rural migrant worker who bumped into him in the street triggering a mass protest involving tens of thousands of people.

A recent demonstration reported by Radio Free Asia

occurred on July 2 when more than 2,000 villagers stormed a local police station in Sangshang township, Fushan city, in southern Guangdong province. Protesters were demanding the release of four farmers, arrested on June 30 over a land dispute. Authorities sent in 600 police to break up the crowd. One woman was seriously injured and an American researcher filming the clash was arrested.

The land dispute dates back to 1992 when the village administration sold off 12.4 square kilometres of farmland to the neighbouring township behind the backs of farmers. When the township government attempted to claim the land in March, the angry farmers stopped the takeover.

At midnight on May 31, the township government dispatched thousands of police and heavy vehicles to destroy crops sown by the farmers worth some 8 million yuan (\$US975,000). To head off a mass protest, the police used two electronic jamming devices to disrupt local telecommunications and set up roadblocks on major transport routes. Now, as many as 200 farmers guard the land day and night, ignoring threats that they would be forcibly removed if they remained.

Recently, in another confrontation between farmers and Chinese authorities in Shengyou in Hebei province, six farmers were killed and up to 100 others seriously injured. The protest, reported in “Peasant unrest continues in China”, was triggered by a dispute over land expropriated by the local government for a state-owned Guohua Dingzhou power plant.

A villager Niu Zhanzong managed to film the attack before he was knocked down, his camera smashed and his arm broken. “We hope the central government will come and investigate. We believe in the central party, but we don’t believe in the local police,” he said.

The film, however, was posted on the *Washington Post* website, provoking a nervous response from Beijing, which duly sacked the local Communist Party boss and local mayor. A construction contractor and 21 accomplices have been arrested for the killings.

Since then, the Hong Kong-based newspaper *Apple Daily* has indicated that the incident may involve the highest levels of Chinese bureaucracy. The man behind the efforts to drive the farmers off their land may well be none other than the son of Li Peng, the former Chinese Premier, who was directly responsible in 1989 for ordering troops to carry out the Tiananmen Square

massacre.

Li’s family is notorious for corrupt profiteering in China’s power industry, effectively running some major state-owned plants as their private businesses. Li’s son, Li Xiaopeng, is the manager of the power station believed to be behind the expulsion of the farmers.

The possible link between the Li Peng family and the violent attack on Shengyou farmers underscores the fact that, under the banner of market reform, the Chinese bureaucracy at all levels is accumulating private wealth at the expense of ordinary people. The further up the chain one goes, the greater the profits being accumulated.

In the 1990s, Beijing decreed that all provinces raise their own finances through taxes on farmers and small businesses. At the same time, provinces, cities and even townships are engaging in a cutthroat competition for investment and so are engaged in offering huge incentives to potential businesses. The net result is a relentless assault on the living standards of working people, already facing high levels of unemployment and poverty, and the ruthless use of the police to stamp out any sign of opposition.

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