
Days of disaster

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"DON'T cry, don't cry. It's a disaster, and you've survived," China's prime minister, Wen Jiabao, told weeping orphans in a town almost flattened by the country's worst natural disaster in more than 30 years. Mr Wen's awkward words may have done little to calm the bereaved children. But amid the huge destruction caused by the earthquake of May 12th, China's leaders thus far have scored some unusual public-relations successes.

Hampered by poor weather (at least for the first day or two) and the blocking of mountain roads by landslides, Chinese troops have been struggling to rescue thousands of people buried in rubble and to bring aid to stricken communities across a wide area of the southwest on the edge of the Tibetan plateau. Three days after the disaster, officials put the number of dead at around 20,000, most of them in Sichuan Province north of the provincial capital, Chengdu. With many trapped, the toll could reach 50,000, the government said.

In contrast with neighbouring Myanmar's lethargic and secretive handling of its cyclone ten days earlier, China responded to the earthquake rapidly and with uncharacteristic openness. Within hours Mr Wen was on a plane, President Hu Jintao was chairing an emergency meeting of the Politburo's Standing Committee and thousands of soldiers and police were being dispatched. After an initial deployment of 5,000 troops the number was ramped up to 100,000 within three days. The official media, often reticent about reporting bad news, rapidly updated casualty numbers. State-owned television provided non-stop coverage.

During China's second-deadliest natural disaster of recent years, flooding along the Yangzi River that killed thousands in 1998, officials barred foreign journalists from some affected areas and failed to update casualty figures for two weeks, before providing suspiciously low numbers. Even this year the government was slow to respond to a snow disaster that affected much of south and central China in January. It expelled foreign journalists from Tibetan-inhabited areas (including the part of Sichuan now worst affected by the earthquake) after an outbreak of anti-Chinese unrest in March.

Of course, covering up was not an option. China measured the earthquake at a magnitude of 7.8, a force so powerful that it sent panicky office workers running into streets as far away as Beijing, 1,500km (930 miles) to the north. But China's leaders are anxious to repair the public-relations damage they have suffered internationally as a result of the Tibet crisis. And they are keen to avoid the kind of criticism directed at Myanmar.

Foreign reporters have been allowed into affected areas without hindrance by officials. China welcomed foreign aid in the form of material and cash. Japan said it was sending an earthquake team. President Hu discussed the disaster in a telephone conversation with George Bush and thanked him for American offers of help. Amid nationwide shock at the scale of the disaster, a recent upsurge of anti-Western sentiment triggered by events in Tibet appears to be abating.

Since March no Politburo member has publicly visited Tibet. Comforting earthquake victims, however, presents few political risks.

Mr Wen has remained at the scene to direct relief operations. Chinese television showed residents muttering "Thank you, prime minister, thank you," after he declared to one group that thousands of troops and police had been deployed. Some victims are angry, but their resentment is directed at local officials rather than the central authorities.

In Dujiangyan, a large town about 50km from the epicentre, a woman in her 50s complains that while some buildings collapsed, the government and party headquarters remained intact. "Corruption and supervision of construction work is a problem, a very big problem," says another resident. "I hope they learn a lesson from this." Even the state-owned media have said shoddy construction may have exacerbated the impact. Casualties at schools have been high, partly because many were in classrooms when the earthquake struck in the early afternoon, but partly too, parents suspect, because they were badly built.

Hundreds of children were buried at Dujiangyan's Xinjian Elementary School, where a four-storey building collapsed like a pack of cards. One young woman, whose son had been killed at the school, was frantically trying to find out where his body had been taken. At one point she stood in front of an ambulance, sobbing and demanding information. Police came and took her gently aside and told her they would try to find the name of the morgue. Several ambulances plied to and from the site, but the official media have reported the rescue of only 50 or so children. Mr Wen watched two of them being pulled from the rubble and wept at the sight, said one Chinese report.

The victims' torch song

Officials are worried about damage to dams upriver from Dujiangyan, closer to the epicentre. Xinhua, a government-controlled news agency, has said Dujiangyan would be "swamped" if the nearby Zipingpu dam were to suffer major problems. Cracks have appeared on the dam's surface and workshops at the site have collapsed. The dam was completed less than two years ago despite concerns raised at the time about building it so close to a seismic fault line.

The Chinese media note that the government's decision to allow prompt coverage follows the implementation on May 1st of new rules on "government information transparency". Under these rules, the authorities are supposed to make public any information involving the "vital interests of citizens". But political calculations are likely to have played a bigger role than the regulations themselves, which still allow information to be withheld if it relates to "state secrets"—a term applied sweepingly in China.

The Olympic games are a powerful incentive. The authorities rapidly decided to bow to public opinion and scale down the razzmatazz surrounding the parade of the Olympic torch through China in order to reflect the tragedy. Having at first suggested the torch ceremonies would continue as planned (they include a relay close to the disaster area next month), officials now say they will be "simplified" and combined with fund-raising for earthquake relief. A ritual that last month served as a red flag to China's critics may now be turned to much better use.

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