

Death count rises from China's floods

by Mary Burdman

Beijing is no longer able to cover up the extent of the flood disaster which hit China in July. As many as 800,000 people, not 2,000 as Beijing has been claiming, may have died in the floods that struck the Yangtze River valley, one of the most densely populated areas in China and a vital agricultural region, in mid-July. This report came from the Hong Kong publication *Trend*, and there are many more reports to back it up. There have been so many people reported missing that it is impossible to assess the real death toll, *Trend* reported. So many deaths would make these floods the worst disaster in China—outside of 40 years of Communist Party rule—since the floods of the 1930s, when at least 600,000 people died.

Concealing so many deaths for months is nothing new for Beijing; the regime covered up for years the deaths of at least 30 million people from the famine caused by Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s.

A strong confirmation of disaster came in the official national press on Oct. 1, China's National Day, the French daily *Le Figaro* reported from Beijing. While the Chinese-language *People's Daily* asserted that the Communist Party is anticipating "great challenges," these challenges are at the level of cataclysm, as the front page of the English-language *China Daily* revealed. The page is made up of headlines including: "A Nation in Struggle Against the Elements; State Fixes Objectives for Limitations of Disasters; Scientific Experts Unite to Monitor Calamities; Power of the People in War Against the Floods." China, always subject to natural disasters, has a long tradition that the demise of regimes is announced by the rage of the elements, *Le Figaro* noted.

Impact on the harvest

There is one thing on which the Beijing regime's power depends at this point. It is not the barrel of a gun; it is the ability to supply China's 1.2 billion people with a daily bowl of rice. Now, Beijing may not be able to do even that. The floods put a full 20% of China's cropland under water, just weeks before the harvest. In some areas, 70% of crops were destroyed.

China has already been devastated by 10 years of "reform"—i.e., stripping whatever infrastructure or industry existed—on top of 30 years of Maoism. At least 100 million jobless, homeless peasants are wandering the country. A Hong Kong journalist who had just visited the flood-devastat-

ed region told *EIR* in early September that there can be no comparison between conditions in China and in Russia. Even the conditions which sparked the upheaval in Russia, such as long lines for even bad meat or clothing, are decades ahead of the conditions Chinese peasants face. Their lives are concentrated on whether they can get some rice and a few vegetables to eat every day, he said; there is no question of meat. Millions are illiterate.

Then, the floods struck. The reports from Hong Kong say that the overall loss from the floods may have reached \$30 billion. China's entire annual budget is only about \$70 billion; whole families earn only about \$50 per month. At least 240 million people suffered the loss of their homes and other property—a figure 40 million higher than government estimates. Most of those who died either drowned or starved after being stranded by the floods. Many starved because they were given "emergency" food that had been stored for 15 years and was spoiled; others drowned when their rubber boats, from 10-year-old stocks, simply disintegrated in the water.

A social explosion

There were riots in many Chinese towns in the flooded region when victims stormed government warehouses for food, *Trend* reported. In the city of Anhui, 10,000 flood refugees, backed by People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers, attacked Communist Party and government warehouses to get food and supplies sent in from Hong Kong and Taiwan. A police chief and government officials were reportedly killed. Such clashes were reported throughout July, *Trend* wrote, and at least 50 flood victims were shot for looting. At a meeting in Beijing, provincial leaders reportedly came to blows, desperately vying for whatever government aid they could get. The party has been accused of dispensing food first to leading party and government officials, followed by PLA units, workers, and miners, and then city and town residents. As usual, China's peasants, hit the hardest, came last. Some have gotten only a few packages of noodles or moldy wheat.

By the end of September, there were reports that thousands of homeless refugees were being moved into China's interior, to Tibet and Xinjiang province, whose people have tried to rise against the Chinese government in the last few years. Thousands more are on the streets of Shanghai and other cities, begging for food.

Many of the unemployed are being rounded up into heavily guarded labor camps, Hong Kong's *Pai Shing* weekly reported. Camps have been established in coastal Guangdong province, where millions of desperate peasants have fled. *Pai Shing* wrote of a sudden drop in the "floating population" in Guangdong, because so many were sent to the camps, where they are forced to work processing tea for export just for scraps of food and shelter. They can only get out of the camps if "ransomed" for about \$30 by relatives.