

Mass protests in the Chinese hinterlands

by Mary M. Burdman

"The peasant movement bears the danger of triggering a student movement," reported the Hong Kong daily *Hsin Pao* on June 10, describing the violent protests by 10-15,000 Chinese peasants, still ongoing as of June 9, in Renshou county of Sichuan province. "If this happens, the second plan will possibly be carried out. If this happens, the June 4 [1989] incident [at Tiananmen Square] is likely to recur in Renshou county." Some 10,000 students from Chengdu City secondary schools also "voiced" their support for the peasant protests, *Hsin Pao* reported.

"The second plan" shows the extent of alarm among China's leadership about the troubled situation in China's hinterlands, where some 900 million peasants live. If the protests spread, *Hsin Pao* reported, and "Renshou county falls into the peasants' hands . . . the armed police will be sent to carry out an armed suppression of the peasants; . . . this incident will be curbed as soon as possible at all costs."

Peasants have been protesting in Renshou county since January; one Hong Kong paper reported demonstrations of up to 10,000 peasants already in April. Sichuan is China's most populous province, and the biggest source of the *man-liu*, the vast "blind current" of 100 million unemployed peasants who wander from the countryside to the coastal cities in search of work.

The spring demonstrations were triggered by the exorbitant taxes which local authorities levy on the peasants for any and every public "service," from road-building to rat-catching. The situation has reverted to that in pre-communist China, with armed tax collectors attempting to extract either cash or labor from the impoverished peasants. Under Deng Xiaoping's economic "reforms" first imposed in 1978, even the most basic maintenance of roads or water projects, previously carried out by the Maoist communes, has stopped—unless the peasants pay. This winter, peasants were hit especially hard because the cash-strapped central government has been unable to pay them for their grain, and they got worthless IOUs, the notorious "white chits," instead. There were smaller disturbances earlier in the year when peasants attacked post offices because they could not cash money orders sent to them by relatives working in the cities.

In Renshou county, the local Communist Party (CP) secretary had used a 60-man security force to collect taxes for building a national highway, and took the last rice reserves

from destitute peasants, according to Hong Kong press reports. They also attempted to arrest a local peasant leader, who had been elected to a local council because of his refusal to pay the exorbitant taxes. Protesting peasants flocked to the county seat and occupied the town hall. The protesters beat several dozen high-ranking officials, and set fire to the town hall and police vehicles. Their numbers were over 15,000 by June 8.

An official of the Sichuan Foreign Affairs Office admitted on June 13 that "there were serious incidents of beating, smashing, and looting," Reuters reported.

The peasants were enraged because on May 27 the Ministry of Agriculture had cancelled some 43 public duties imposed over 10 years ago, and announced that farmers were not to pay any more than 5% of their income in taxes. The farmers, who were paying 20-30% of their meager incomes (Chinese peasants earn the equivalent of about \$120 a year) asserted that they had already paid their taxes through the year 2000, and wanted their money back. This would mean that Renshou county, already 20 million yuan in deficit, would not be able to collect any taxes for the next six years, and would have to repay over 10 million yuan.

Leaders are worried

China's leaders are clearly alarmed. Already in December 1992, the State Council had issued 10 measures to boost "farmers' enthusiasm," invoking the chief of the ancient leaders, Deng Xiaoping himself, who warned that "the economy in the 1990s may be hurdled by agriculture." In March 1992, Tian Jiyun, the vice prime minister for agriculture, warned the National People's Congress that "if there are problems in the villages, there is no one in the current government who can stay in power." If the peasants revolt, he said, "the consequences will be unimaginable." President Jiang Zemin warned at the same time that "if agriculture meets greater problems in Sichuan, the effects will be unimaginable."

On June 17, Deng was again invoked. He was quoted in the Hong Kong *New Century* magazine that "if economic trouble occurs in the 1990s, it is very likely to be in agriculture. If there is agricultural trouble, the country would not recover for many years."

The trouble is not confined to Sichuan. In late May, armed police were sent to deal with peasants who were demanding the right to farm government-owned land along the Yellow River in Henan province. The peasants blocked a road and demanded tolls from passing drivers. Confidential statistics from the Chinese Internal Security Ministry, reported in the Berlin daily *Tageszeitung* on June 15, show that there was unrest throughout China in 1992. There were, overall, 540 demonstrations and illegal gatherings, 480 strikes, and 75 attacks on government and CP institutions. While most unrest occurred in Sichuan, where there were 78 demonstrations and strikes, there was also trouble in Jiangxi

(the early base of the Chairman Mao) where there were 52 strikes and demonstrations. Other sources report that there were 100 peasant demonstrations in the last half of 1992, in nine provinces. On June 20, the *Farmer's Daily* published an order from the Public Security Ministry banning local police from extorting money and imposing arbitrary fines, saying the "ill wind" of police corruption "is severely affecting public security reputation and damaging relations between police and the people."

Most ominous for the Chinese leadership were the demonstrations in Lhasa, Tibet on May 25-26, the first since 1989. A group of at least 1,000 demonstrators began a march to protest inflation and rising food prices, which quickly turned into attacks on Chinese rule and the mass migration of Han Chinese into Tibet. Although the demonstrations were quickly suppressed, it must be remembered that the mass protests of 1989 began in Tibet; martial law was imposed on Lhasa in March 1989, two months before the Beijing Spring and Tiananmen Square.

This is exactly what the Chinese CP fears, wrote the leading German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on June 22. Just months ago, the CP was basking in the sunshine of the "economic miracle," but no longer. The peasant protests this spring could presage great outrage in the countryside. The peasants are discontented. In a country with a history of great peasant revolts, this is not something the government can take lightly, the paper wrote. It will be dangerous for the government if political demands grow out of the economic unrest, as happened in Tibet in May.

The communists know the dangers: They themselves used peasant revolts as their main weapon to take power in 1949.

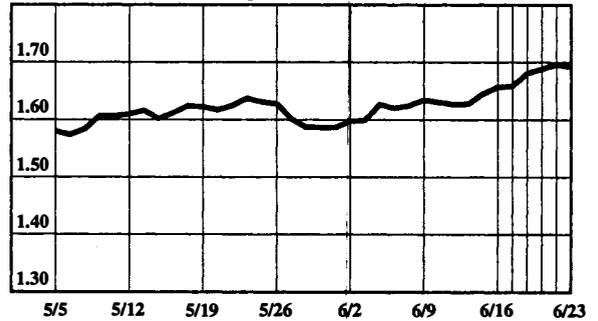
The worried Chinese State Council held a national "telephone conference" on June 21, to announce (once again) that 37 local taxes were to be abolished. Senior State Councillor Chen Jungsheng warned of trouble in the countryside. "Protecting the legal interest of farmers and their enthusiasm in farming and actually helping to alleviate burdens of farmers are an urgent political task," Chen was quoted by Xinhua, the official news agency. As of July 10, local governments will be prohibited from independently taxing the peasants; only the Ministries of Finance and Agriculture and the State Planning Commission will be authorized to do so.

As of mid-June, senior Chinese officials were told not to leave Beijing pending a series of top-level discussions on the economy. There will be a full meeting of the Communist Party Central Committee by the end of June or early July, to discuss the economy's problems and how to correct them, according to Hong Kong press reports. Traditionally, the entire Beijing leadership goes to the seaside for vacations this time of year. The leaders will not only be discussing the unrest among China's 800 million peasants, but also the reports that inflation and credit and money supplies are running out of control in the cities.

Currency Rates

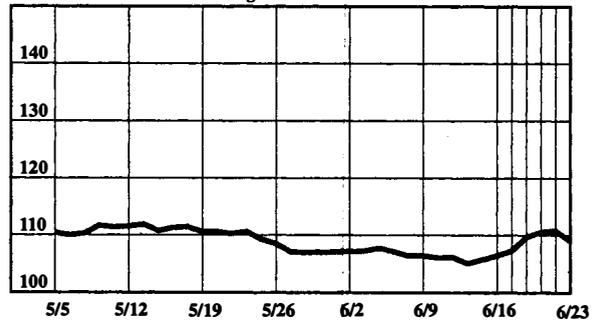
The dollar in deutschmarks

New York late afternoon fixing



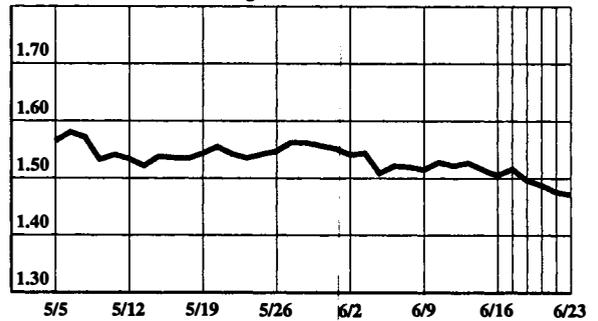
The dollar in yen

New York late afternoon fixing



The British pound in dollars

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The dollar in Swiss francs

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