

Continued stonewalling over an inquiry into the Sichuan quake will only threaten social harmony, writes Jerome A. Cohen

# Political tremors

The first anniversary of the tragic May 12 Sichuan earthquake is an occasion for evaluating the Chinese government's performance in meeting the horrendous challenges presented. In many respects, it seems to be doing a commendable job.

Its most difficult problem has been dealing with the parents of the some 6,000 children who died when their schools collapsed, even while adjacent structures were often left standing. From the outset, it was taken for granted – wholly apart from the widespread suspicion that the schools had been shoddily constructed – that the government would provide not only short-term "consolation money" but also compensation to parents for the loss of what was usually their only child.

Initially, the amount of compensation was in question, and there were negotiations, petitions, protests, media interviews and attempts to bring lawsuits against governments, officials and contractors that had allegedly cut corners

[Mainland officials'] pathetic concealment contrasts with Taiwan's handling of the island's massive 1999 earthquake

in erecting "tofu-dreg" classrooms and dormitories. Local officials, worried about their jobs and potential liabilities, desperately sought to impose "harmony" and prevent the aggrieved from taking their demands to the provincial capital of Chengdu and even Beijing. Eventually, most parents were induced to accept an offer of about US\$8,800 per child, plus certain retirement benefits, but on condition that they agree to cease their agitation and litigation.

Money, however, is not their main concern. Many have continued to demand justice for the "wronged souls" of their children, meaning at least a fair and thorough investigation of why 7,000 schools collapsed, and publication of a list of the victims. The authorities promised such an investigation, and an early central government report acknowledged that schools were often badly built.

Yet the official line soon changed. The Sichuan government denied that there had

been poor school construction. A Beijing planning official reported that the building plans showed no evidence of negligence and claimed that inspection of the demolished structures was impossible. Officials urge protesters to get on with their lives, especially by trying to have another child, as some have done.

Many parents refuse to be deflected. They insist on an investigation so the government and people can not only learn from the disaster but also assign responsibility and adopt reforms. They believe that faulty construction resulted from cost-cutting, corruption and incompetence of local officials, perhaps even from central government instructions to downplay safety in favour of the economy.

Many suspect a cover-up. Yet their only progress in penetrating the wall of silence is the government's belated assessment – without details – of the number of student deaths. No lawsuits have been accepted by the courts, and public interest lawyers have been warned away. Rights activists disseminating information have been locked up for "spreading rumours and disrupting social order", "subversion" and "possessing state secrets".

Investigative journalists have been suppressed. Foreign journalists have been harassed as "outside agitators". Parents have been ordered to reject interviews on pain of arrest. Volunteers assisting the artist Ai Weiwei (艾未未) to collect and publish information on detained and deceased students have been stopped. Recently, some parents, determined to petition Beijing, evaded travel barriers, only to be forced home to hospital confinement for possible swine flu.

Despite a brief flirtation with transparency following the earthquake, earlier promulgation of China's first "Open Government Information" regulation and official pronouncements about the "people's right to know", in practice it is difficult for the regime to overcome China's traditional government secrecy.

A credible and public government investigation and report in response to popular pressure, such as the United States has conducted after major disasters, including president John F. Kennedy's



assassination, the September 11 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina, seems unattainable to Chinese leaders.

Their pathetic concealment contrasts with the Taiwan government's handling of the island's massive 1999 earthquake, which triggered immediate official inquiries that revealed how cost-saving construction compromises and malfeasance resulted in unnecessary deaths and destruction. That in turn led to strengthening of safety laws, as well as civil suits and criminal prosecutions against those responsible.

Moreover, in both Taiwan and the US, uninhibited media and civic organisations supplement and sometimes substitute for

official investigations and, in both places, trials before independent judges also expose misconduct.

Mainland China allows none of these outlets for expressing popular dissatisfaction, enhancing accountability and improving public safety. Nor does it tolerate free elections beyond some villages. This is not a prescription for "harmony" but for eventual political earthquakes. How high on the political Richter scale will those tremors be?

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## Factory fodder

These days, you have to think twice about eating pork, and indeed most types of meat, from large-scale, factory farming. "Swine flu" is a new strain of influenza that contains genes closely related to the real hog flu, which affects pigs and, usually, not humans. However, so named, the outbreak made us think about pigs and their plight. Living in a city, it is all too easy to forget that the pork we buy at the supermarket or wet market came from an animal that once lived. Few of us know how that animal was bred and raised.

Pig breeding has become a highly controlled process for large agri-businesses around the world. Every stage of the hog's life, from artificial insemination to breeding certain genetic characteristics, is controlled. The business demands that sows have many litters – maybe three or four a year – and that piglets put on weight quickly. The breeds of pigs that get to multiply for food production are ones that have these characteristics. No unlike athletes taking growth hormones to bulk out, pigs are given a "bionic" diet to grow abnormally fast. Under these conditions, a pig takes about six months to balloon out and be ready for slaughter. Left to nature, a pig would take a year to mature. So, breeds that do not supply a quick financial return are quickly out of favour.

The "advantage" of this kind of farming is price. By standardising and speeding up the process, the price of pork can be reduced. But this has another consequence. Small family farms with a limited number of animals simply cannot compete. Globalisation in trade means meat can be exported cheaply with the effect of destroying local farming communities.

Beyond negative social consequences, there are questions about the wisdom of factory farming. Breeding to produce genetic uniformity not only reduces biodiversity but also creates a greater risk of disease spread. Where a particular breed is susceptible to a disease, many animals will be infected. Keeping them in large numbers within a crowded compound exacerbates the risks of the disease spreading very quickly. There are also enormous environmental challenges. Dealing with manure is one, and culling diseased animals and their disposing of them is another.

Let's not forget what we had to do to stop the spread of bird flu – culling millions of birds. Bird flu gave us an insight into how chickens are bred today. Commercial chicken farms are heartbreaking in the way they cram the birds into small spaces with controlled feeding. Happy are the chickens that are not genetically modified and can forage outdoors. But, the "ideal" chicken is a monster that matures abnormally quickly. According to a US study, if a human baby grew as quickly as a typical five-week factory fryer, he would weigh 349 pounds by the age of two. Do we really want to eat such a chicken? The free-range bird seems to be a much superior bet.

Cattle don't do any better. The mad cow disease epidemic in Britain, in the late 1980s, was truly scary. The cause was believed to have been feeding the remains of diseased animals and bone meal to herbivorous cattle.

There is a problem even with vegetables in the world of industrialised agriculture. According to the Centre for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture, in the US, more than 95 per cent of vegetables that had been grown in the world have disappeared since the arrival of highly commercialised farming practices. This is a huge loss of biodiversity. As with animals, "factory" vegetables are bred to grow quickly and have long shelf-lives. Genetic modification makes them look big and nice.

Why should we care? There is no need to keep animals in appalling conditions when the world can be fed better on less meat. If people ate more of the grain and vegetables used to raise livestock, the ecological costs would be lower. There would be fewer food scares. Local growers could earn a living again with common sense based farms, and we could connect once more to what we eat.

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## Other Voices

### US, Pakistan need to bridge Afghan divide

Malou Innocent

US President Barack Obama recently met the leaders of Pakistan and Afghanistan to discuss their full commitment to fighting terrorists in their region. Media coverage of the three-way talks cast the president's efforts in a favourable light, even as conditions in the region were being described, in his own words, as "increasingly perilous".

Mr Obama deserves credit for leading the meeting. Unlike his predecessor, he fully appreciates the seriousness of America's top foreign-policy challenge. The US public, however, must separate the man from the policy. Pakistan's frontier region along the Afghan border stands fully "Talibanised". Pakistan's military, for whatever reasons, has ceded state sovereignty, police and education to militants in areas of the north. And Afghan President Hamid Karzai is widely perceived within Afghanistan as being thoroughly corrupt.

It is an open secret that elements of Pakistan's military-dominated national intelligence agency assist the jihadist insurgency which US and Nato troops are fighting in Afghanistan. If the strategic chasm persists between Islamabad and Washington, the military campaign in Afghanistan will fail.

In eastern and southern Afghanistan, the insurgency has some indigenous support, but the commanders enmesh themselves across the border in Pakistan.

Hawks within Pakistan's military and intelligence services see the insurgency to blunt the rising influence of their rapidly growing nemesis, India, which strongly supports Mr Karzai's regime.

While high-level Pakistani commanders have their own agenda, security forces on the ground could have their own. Pakistan's paramilitary force, the 80,000-strong Frontier Corps is charged with patrolling the Federally Administered Tribal Area and the adjoining Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan.

Last October, the US approved the Security Development Programme to "train the trainers" and improve security along the 2,600km border with Afghanistan. But most soldiers are recruited locally from the "tribalised" provinces and may be unwilling to fight Pashtun militants.

Because Pakistan's security forces have "gone bad" – and, at times, unwilling – to uproot militant forces, Washington has decided to tackle the problem itself. Mr Obama has continued his predecessor's policy of Predator drone missile strikes, which have exacerbated radicalism and pushed militants deeper into Pakistan.

Aerial strikes and other stop-gap measures will do little to close the strategic rift between Washington and Islamabad. Unless Mr Obama can reassure hawks in Pakistan's military and intelligence apparatus that India no longer poses a threat to their jobs (a promise impossible to guarantee) then the stalemate in Afghanistan will persist. Mr Obama must accept the reality that, if the US and Nato want to win in Afghanistan, they need a partner that fights its enemies, not friends.

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### Even the US may agree the dollar has had its day

Onno Wijnholds

Zhou Xiaochuan (周小川), the governor of the People's Bank of China, recently suggested that replacing the US dollar with the International Monetary Fund's Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) as the dominant reserve currency would bring greater stability to the financial system. The idea of reforming the system by introducing a supranational reserve currency is also, it appears, supported by Russia and other emerging markets. And a UN advisory committee, chaired by the Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz, has argued for a new global reserve currency, possibly one based on the SDR.

Transforming the US dollar standard into an SDR-based system would be a major break with a policy that has lasted more than 60 years. The SDR was introduced 40 years ago to supplement what was then seen as an inadequate level of global reserves, and was subsequently enshrined in the IMF's amended Articles of Agreement as the future principal reserve asset.

But the world soon became awash with dollars. So, instead of becoming the principal reserve asset of the global system, the proportion of SDRs in global reserves shrank to a tiny fraction, rendering the SDR the monetary equivalent of Esperanto. Although the euro, created in 1999, turned out to be a more serious competitor to the dollar, its share in total global reserves has probably remained below 30 per cent, compared to 65 per cent for the dollar.

There are two ways in which the dollar's role in the international monetary system can be reduced.

One possibility is a gradual, market-determined erosion of the dollar as a reserve currency in favour of the euro. But, while the euro's international role has increased since its inception, it is hard to see it overtaking the dollar as the dominant reserve currency in the foreseeable future.

With the dollar's hegemony unlikely to be seriously undermined by market forces, at least in the short and medium term, the only way to bring about a major reduction in its

It would be useful for the IMF to study anew an SDR substitution account and similar schemes

role as a reserve currency is by international agreement. The Chinese proposal falls into this category. And there is a way back for SDRs' importance to grow. Back in 1980, the IMF came close to adopting a so-called SDR substitution account. The idea was to permit countries whose official dollar holdings were larger than they were comfortable with to convert dollars into SDRs. Conversion would occur outside the market, and this would not put downward pressure on the dollar. Member countries would receive an asset that was more stable than the dollar, as it was based on a basket of currencies, thereby providing better protection against losses.

The plan fell apart when some major IMF shareholders could not

accept the burden-sharing arrangements needed in case of losses due to exchange-rate movements.

What are the chances of adopting a scheme of this kind today? If the US prepared to go along with a reform of the international monetary system that reduces the dollar's role?

Until recently, this would have been unlikely. But the changed international climate could convince the US to go along with a conversion scheme. But even if an SDR substitution account is established, it is unlikely that the dollar's share in international reserves would fall to an insignificant level. It will remain important for many countries as a vehicle for intervention in foreign-exchange markets, as well as for invoicing and for denominated internationally traded securities.

But one can envisage a system in which international reserves are each held in roughly equal shares of dollars, euros and SDRs. While there are currently other priorities, it would be useful for the IMF to study anew an SDR substitution account and similar schemes. If it does not, the debate will take place elsewhere.

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### New breed of soldier takes on the Taliban

David Ignatius

It's a small irony of history that General David Petraeus, attacked by the left for his role in revitalising the Bush administration's effort in Iraq, is now being asked by a Democratic president to do much the same thing in Afghanistan. The Centcom chief intends to apply the same counterinsurgency tactics he forged in Iraq, but Afghanistan will be, in many ways, a tougher fight.

General Petraeus isn't a man who likes to lose, and he's assembling an all-star team. Gone is General David McKiernan, a soldier but uninspired commander, replaced by Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal, who, like General Petraeus, has helped reinvent the US military.

General Petraeus has an asset in this new campaign that was sorely lacking in Iraq: strong diplomatic support from special envoy Richard Holbrooke, and this enables a regional approach to the war. Mr Holbrooke and General Petraeus are two headstrong bulls in a small paddock, but so far they are making this crucial partnership work.

To understand General Petraeus' basic approach, imagine a horizontal line charting the level of military of insurgents. On the left are "irreconcilables" who will never be co-opted by the US. Towards the right, groups become more pliable and join the "reconcilable" camp. In Iraq, General Petraeus moved groups from one category to the other – transforming hard-core insurgents into tribal militias on the US payroll. Remaining fanatics became targets for special forces. Once hostile areas are cleared, gentler counterinsurgency tools are used to hold them and build

through economic development.

General Petraeus' plan in Afghanistan is to drive his enemy very hard this year with the additional 21,000 troops President Barack Obama has approved – and then see how the Taliban begins to crack. If the strategy succeeds, the "chameleon insurgents", as General Petraeus calls them, will begin to peel away.

As General Petraeus envisages reconciliation with the Taliban, it will happen village by village, across Afghanistan's nearly 40 districts.

That's the campaign plan, but there are several problems. The first is that Petraeus is a former US commander, replaced by Lieutenant General Petraeus wants to co-ordinate with the Pakistani commander, General Ashfaq Kiyani, so that the Taliban fighters will be cut off. But General Kiyani remains wary of the US embrace.

A second problem is that the US doesn't have good-enough intelligence to drive its Afghan strategy of local reconciliation. To get better information, a new high-level post has been created, and a key strategy is to bring Colonel Chris Kolenda, who became something of an amateur ethnologist during his last tour in Afghanistan.

General Petraeus wants to restore tribal authority, as he did in Iraq, and meld it with the power of the central government and a US-trained army. Mr Obama knows the immense difficulty of trying to make Afghanistan a functioning modern country. But with his two bulls, General Petraeus and Mr Holbrooke, he's marching his remaining fanatics into the "graveyard of empires" anyway.

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