

Two years on, history repeats itself

Written by Cao Changqing 曹常青

Friday, 23 April 2010 08:54

On Wednesday last week, a magnitude 7.1 earthquake hit Yushu County in northwestern China's Qinghai Province. At the time of writing, the death toll had surpassed 2,000, with the number of injured exceeding 10,000. Earthquakes are natural disasters and as such are very difficult to predict. However, both this one and the major quake that devastated parts of Sichuan Province two years ago have led to a human tragedy exacerbated by the political system in China.

First of all, experts issued a warning before the earthquake hit, but China Earthquake Administration (CEA) officials did not take it seriously. The same thing happened with the Sichuan earthquake, when at least two seismologists issued a warning that was later suppressed by the authorities, who were concerned that the news would have an effect on the Olympic torch relay prior to the Games in Beijing.

Before last week's earthquake, the media in Guangdong Province reported that a seismologist working for the Shanxi Earthquake Administration's Houma station, Yu Xianghong (喻相红), accurately predicted the time and location of the earthquake, but again the warnings were not heeded. On March 9, a month before the Qinghai earthquake, the CEA announced that a destructive earthquake was unlikely to happen within China's borders for the foreseeable future.

Second, the authorities have made absolutely no moves to apologize to the public for having failed to issue a warning and for suppressing the accurate forecast. Again, this is a repeat of what happened with the Sichuan earthquake.

You wouldn't know it from the state-controlled media either which, true to form, just waxed lyrical about how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and state leaders were so concerned about the people. Premier Wen Jiabao (温家宝) rushed to the site of the earthquake to make a show of compassion, spouting a lot of hot air about how everyone is in it together and how they will pull through together. So now the populace has to show its gratitude to the CCP, the very group that has made matters worse.

The third point refers to another scandal that links last week's earthquake and the one that happened two years ago. That is, the authorities refused all offers of international aid in the all-important 72-hour period immediately following the quake. Both Taiwan and Japan, which have a lot of experience in dealing with earthquakes and which are relatively near to China, offered to send rescue teams, but both of these offers were turned down for the reason that China already had sufficient personnel.

A journalist working for Reuters interviewed a teacher named Xu Haiying (许海英) from Yushu's elementary school who said that there were students buried under the rubble, but they did not have the equipment to get to them. Xu added that there weren't enough people to help out. A local rescue worker commented on how the situation made him sad because some people were still alive in their houses and the rescue teams were unable to get them out.

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Not only are the authorities refusing offers of help from outside, they're also not letting civic organizations get in, having sealed off all of the roads leading into Yushu.

A full 97 percent of the residents of Yushu County are Tibetan and many of them only speak the Tibetan language. Surely, it would have made sense for Beijing to send in rescue teams with Tibetans in them instead of Han Chinese teams. Even Guangdong's Southern Metropolis Daily (南方都市报) complained that the language barrier was negatively impacting rescue efforts and putting the lives of many disaster victims at risk. The reason for this decision is that Beijing was worried that if Tibetans went to help in the rescue efforts, they would be shocked by what they saw and this would have an unsettling effect on the people when the information leaked out.

The final point concerns the quality of construction, or the lack of it. This is something that came to light after the Sichuan earthquake, when shabby construction practices caused the needless deaths of more than 5,000 schoolchildren as a large number of schools collapsed. According to the head of the Qinghai Department of Education, at least 11 schools were destroyed by the Yushu quake and the Yushu No. 3 Elementary School alone, of which 80 percent of its single-story classrooms collapsed, had 3,000 students.

An official safety survey conducted last year on schools in China found that 60 percent of school buildings in Qinghai fell short of the required standards. Two people tried to look into the problem of school buildings collapsing in the aftermath of the Sichuan quake, but were given a custodial sentence for their pains.

Not long ago there was a magnitude 8.8 earthquake in Chile, but thanks to the strict laws on quake-resistant buildings, the death toll was kept to less than 500. The Qinghai earthquake, at magnitude 7.1, has already left more than 2,000 dead. One Chinese Internet user commented about the difference between what happened in Chile and China and how China is a country with 1.3 billion people, has over US\$2 trillion in foreign currency reserves, a load of billionaires, countless academics and officials and how it couldn't manage to do what Chile has done.

There were also differences in the manner in which the two earthquakes were responded to. In the case of the Sichuan quake, public reaction was very strong, with people falling over themselves to make donations to the relief effort and celebrities leading the way (although one suspects this was for show in certain cases).

Last week, we saw something entirely different. One cannot discount the fact that the predominant ethnicity of the locals in Qinghai had something to do with this (the province is actually the birthplace of the Dalai Lama and the Twelfth Panchen Lama died there).

The Chinese are generally quite vocal in their opposition to the idea of Tibetan independence, claiming that the Tibetans are their "compatriots," but when it comes to lending a hand in times of need, they cannot even bring themselves to put up a front.

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□ TRANSLATED BY PAUL COOPER

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2010/04/23](#)