

[Editor's note: From March 23 to May 19, news media reported seven school killings across China. The sudden outbreak of senseless crimes highlighted China's already shaky security condition and growing social discontent, and prompted high profile official reactions. The following report is based on information from Chinese and international media]

A new crime wave stunned China recently. From March 23 to May 19, seven school killings across China were reported by news media. These pre-meditated crimes appeared to be random killings targeting innocent children.

The sudden outbreak of senseless crimes highlighted China's already shaky security condition and growing social discontent, and prompted high profile official reactions.

China school attacks in the last two months

March 23: Zheng Minshen, 41, killed eight students and injured five with a knife outside a school gate in Nanping City, Fujian Province.

April 12: A man, 40, went on a stabbing rampage as students left Xizhen Elementary School in Hepu County, Guangxi Province, killing an eight-year-old student and an elderly woman, and wounding five others.

April 28: A man brandishing a knife injured 18 students and a teacher in an elementary school in Leizhou City, Guangdong Province. The 33-year-old suspect Chen Kangbing was a teacher at another public school in Leizhou City, on "sick leave" since February 2006.

April 29: Xu Yuyuan, 47, broke into a kindergarten class of 4-year olds in Taizhou City, Jiangsu Province, stabbing and wounding 29 children and three teachers.

April 30: Wang Yonglai, 45, wounded five preschoolers with a hammer in the Shanzhuang Elementary School of Weifang City, Shandong Province. He then doused himself with gasoline grabbed two children and set himself on fire. Teachers pulled the children away before he died at the scene.

May 12: A cleaver-wielding man, 48, killed nine including two adults and injured eleven in a kindergarten in Shaanxi Province. He committed suicide after the attack.

May 19: Six men in their teens or early 20s with knives burst into a dormitory at the Hainan Institute of Science and Technology and injured seven students.

The government response

The Chinese government claimed that the killers had mental disorders. The Minister of Public Security, Meng Jianzhu, therefore ordered local authorities to “screen residents for potential risks.” People with a history of mental illness or dissatisfaction with life had to be identified, the ministry said in a circular. [1] He also called for improved psychological counseling for anti-social and paranoid individuals. [2]

Meng Jianzhu promised extreme measures to deter the new crimes. In a nationwide conference on May 12, Meng said, “We must strike at the criminals so hard that they don't dare to hurt the children.” [3]

Meng's strike-hard warning was accompanied by some high profile security deployments. Per an Agence France-Press (AFP) report, “More than 2,000 security guards dressed in riot gear were sent to some Beijing schools on Wednesday. Beijing News, citing police, said, however, that thousands more were needed to patrol the capital's schools alone. Similar scenes occurred nationwide, press reports said, with armed police seen at schools in the city of Changsha.” [4]

In a May 13 interview with Hong Kong's Phoenix TV, Premier Wen Jiabao said: “In addition to adopting vigorous security measures, we also have to pay attention to some deep-seated causes behind these problems, including dealing with some social conflicts and resolving disputes.” [5]

Shenzhen's vice mayor and police chief Li Ming offered his insight. He believes that strike-hard alone is not going to work. Prevention and fixing the root causes are essential. He called for a new law to control the city's mobile population, especially the unemployed migrant workers, “(If the new laws are approved), we will ban anyone who is unemployed for over three months from renting an apartment, and send them home.” [6]

Comments from non-government sources

Yang Hengjun, an author and former Beijing official who is now a prominent Internet writer in China, averaging 150,000 readers a day [7] questioned the wisdom of Minister Meng and Vice Mayor Li.

“The school killers had no criminal records. They were average people from underprivileged social groups. They were not afraid of death. ... (so the strike-hard measure) is senseless.”

Yang compared the anti-terrorist effort in the U.S. with China's crime fighting: “The U.S. can ‘strike hard,’ and even launch a war to root out the terrorists, but certainly not to ‘frighten’ them. (China's) problem is that it is our own society that has produced the school killers, who are middle-aged and jobless men from the underprivileged population. They have nothing in common with the habitual thieves, triad gangs, corrupt officials who hold high positions, and other habitual offenders.”

Yang bluntly called Vice Mayor Li's plan to expel the unemployed migrant workers “a very evil idea.” He added, “You can drive them out of Shenzhen, but can you drive them out of China, out

of society, out of the earth? Are these unemployed people not Chinese? Did our country not cause their unemployment? I would like to remind everyone: We must prevent any unjust treatment toward the unemployed and other disadvantaged groups in the name of the 'strike hard policy.'" [8]

Han Han, one of the country's most popular bloggers (and a huge irritant to the authorities), wrote that killing the weak was seen by the attackers as the most effective way of exacting revenge on a society "that has no way out." [9, 10] Within hours his post was removed from his website.

Martin K. Whyte, a Harvard University sociologist in his new book, *Myth of the Social Volcano*, discussed the frustrations of the average Chinese, saying that a cauldron of discontent still bubbles. He argued that it is mostly because average citizens still feel they have no steam safety valve, and the government is still concerned about keeping the lid on. "The system still very much tries to pretend everything is going fine," he said, "and it still hushes things up when there are disturbances." [11]

Li Heping, a leading Christian human rights lawyer in China offered his analysis in a radio interview.

"(The majority of the Chinese people) were brainwashed by the Communist propaganda during the civil war before 1949, namely, wherever there is repression, there will be fighting back; rebellion is justice. Now that they are being treated unfairly, many people are tempted to fight back, and the more violent and wider spread, the better. They may come up with the plan to murder children to spread their message."

"Lack of spiritual belief," observed Li, also contributed to the tragic situation. "This is a consequence of promoting the Chinese official religion – Marxist Materialism." [12]

Endnotes:

[1] Financial Times, May 14, 2010

http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a6c0386e-5f6b-11df-978c-00144feab49a,dwp_uuid=9c33700c-4c86-11da-89df-0000779e2340.html

[2] Xinhua, May 12, 2010

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-05/12/c_13289975.htm

[3] Ministry of Public Security, May 12, 2010

<http://www.mps.gov.cn/n16/n1237/n1342/n803680/2413275.html>

[4] Agence France-Presse, May 13, 2010

<http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/global-filipino/world/05/13/10/china-police-chief-vows-strike-school-attackers>

[5] Reuters, May 14, 2010

<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE64D0C820100514>

[6] Nanfang Daily, April 30, 2010

http://opinion.nfdaily.cn/topic/content/2010-04/30/content_11558744.htm

[7] China Media Project, March 13, 2010/5/25

Recent School Killings in China

Chinascopes

<http://cmp.hku.hk/2010/03/15/4922/>

[8] Boxun.com, May 14, 2010

<http://news.boxun.com/news/gb/pubvp/2010/05/201005141554.shtml>

[9, 10] The Economist, May 12, 2010

http://www.economist.com/opinion/displayStory.cfm?story_id=16103967&source=features_box_main

The Hindu, May 13, 2010

<http://beta.thehindu.com/news/international/article428363.ece>

[11] New York Times, April 30, 2010

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/01/world/asia/01china.html?src=me>

[12] Sound of Hope, May 14, 2010

<http://www.soundofhope.org/programs/253/159118-1.asp>