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China Reins In Rural Protests, but Not Resentment

Decline in Violent Demonstrations Follows Increased Surveillance, Police Restraint, Swift Arrests

By Edward Cody

DONGZHOU, China -- The resentment that led to a bloody confrontation between farmers and policemen here last December has only sharpened over the past 11 months. Local officials are still corrupt, Dongzhou residents complained, and a jutting power plant has risen on the land whose seizure by the government touched off the battle in the first place.

But the simmering anger has been contained; the violence, in which a number of protesting farmers were killed, has not been repeated on any scale. Through a mix of increased surveillance, police restraint and swift arrests of any troublemakers, security forces have kept unrest off the busy lanes of this fishing and farming village on the South China Sea, about 125 miles northeast of Hong Kong.

"It's out of the question," said a Dongzhou merchant who was asked Thursday whether a large riot like the one Dec. 6 could erupt again here. "People are all scared to death."

The formula for stability in Dongzhou has been applied across China, authorities said, and with apparently similar results. Liu Jinguo, the deputy public security minister, said recently that the number of violent protests in China in the first nine months of 2006 was down by 22 percent over the same period in 2005. That marked a sharp change from the steady increases in rural unrest recorded by his ministry in 2004 and 2005.

The drop in reports of violence has been matched in recent months by a reduction in anecdotal accounts of unrest that are passed along by dissidents or posted on their Web sites. Taken together, the trends suggest Beijing might have reined in what seemed to be a crisis in rural areas that threatened broader unrest and, ultimately, the stability of President Hu Jintao's government.

If the reduction proves permanent, it would mark a major advance for Hu's campaign to sustain rapid but highly uneven economic development and create what he calls a "harmonious socialist society." The rural unrest was considered so dangerous to the government's aims last year that Premier Wen Jiabao acknowledged he was losing sleep over it.

Deputy Minister Liu, in remarks relayed by the official media, said many riots were prevented recently before they started, because police had information on what was about to happen and helped officials intervene to deal with farmers' grievances before they exploded into violence.

Dongzhou residents, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of police retribution, said they believe large numbers of their friends and neighbors have been recruited as informers and that their telephones are regularly tapped. The flood of police patrols that followed last December's riot has subsided, they said, but riot police remain stationed in a nearby barracks in case of trouble.

In addition, a half-dozen villagers were sentenced to prison terms of five to seven years, members of their families said.

Liu Kaiming, who heads the Institute of Contemporary Observation in nearby Shenzhen, said several more benign government measures also have contributed to the drop in China's rural violence. After the killings last December -- the government said three were killed, but some villagers say the count was 10 or more -- orders came down from Beijing barring police here and elsewhere from rough tactics that could lead to bloodshed.

Lending force to the orders for a softer approach, officials deemed responsible for excessive police tactics have been disciplined after several of the riots.

Three officials of Shanwei city, which administers Dongzhou, were punished for the killings here. The deputy police chief, Wu Sheng, who was the on-scene commander on Dec. 6, was fired, according to an official account. Warnings were put into the files of others: Li Min, the deputy mayor and police chief; Lin Jinsong, the deputy party secretary; and Chen Huinan, who headed the Shanwei construction bureau.

Similarly, three officials were dismissed and five others given warnings after a large-scale riot in April 2005 at Dongyang, in Zhejiang province 400 miles northeast of here.

Alongside the law enforcement measures, Hu's government launched a campaign to build what officials call "a new socialist countryside." The program translated into vast amounts of development spending and repeated exhortations to rural officials that they must end corruption and deal with farmers' problems before discontent rises to the boiling level.

The Communist Party Central Committee and the government issued a joint appeal Tuesday, for instance, demanding that corrupt local officials stop collecting illegal fees from farmers and disregarding their needs in seizing land. The appeal called on officials "to rectify the violation of farmers' interests, prevent the illegal seizure of farmland and regulate the compensation procedure to better protect farmers' interests."

Government spending on rural projects was increased by \$5.3 billion this year, reaching a total of \$42.5 billion, according to Premier Wen's budget predictions. In particular, his government abolished a long-detested agricultural tax, which had persisted in one form or another since imperial times. Wen promised to follow up with medical insurance for farmers and free education for their children through high school.

Liu, the Shenzhen-based researcher, said abolition of the agricultural tax was particularly welcome in farming families. That and the other measures reinforced the view often expressed by Chinese farmers that their troubles stem from corrupt local officials and that things would be better if only Beijing realized what was going on.

"I don't think this situation will ever be solved unless some high-level official from Beijing comes here and takes charge," said a Dongzhou resident. "The local officials are not to be trusted."

Despite Beijing's extra spending, the level of discontent in the countryside still explodes regularly. Even with the drop, Deputy Minister Liu said, China experienced 17,900 riots or other violent incidents of 100 people or more from January through September.

Hundreds of people sacked a hospital in Sichuan province on Nov. 10, for instance, after a boy died from what the family felt was inadequate care because of an inability to pay. Two days earlier, farmers outraged by a land confiscation surrounded a new granary during its inauguration and held those inside hostage for nearly 24 hours.

Here in Dongzhou, farmers staged a brief protest Oct. 1 in front of the giant power plant that has gone up on their confiscated land, villagers said. A number of uniformed police officers stood by, but the protest was allowed to end without intervention and people dispersed peacefully, they recalled.

Each farming family was promised the equivalent of \$3,750 for the seized land when the project began several years ago, villagers said. But although the plant recently went into operation, no money has been paid, they complained. A special investigation team has been working in Dongzhou ever since the riot to determine where the money is and how much each family should receive, they said, but no results have been announced.

"We haven't got a penny," said one resident who stands to receive money. "No wonder the villagers fight against the government."

The investigation team has now become part of the battle, itself confiscating land to build a headquarters, villagers said. When the farmer who worked the land assaulted an official during an argument over compensation, they said, he was taken into custody. In retaliation, villagers said they locked eight local officials in a Buddhist temple for a week, until police pushed their way to the door and forced it open.

Researcher Jin Ling contributed to this report.