

# China's rural 'time bomb'

Published: Feb. 10, 2006 at 12:59 PM

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 9 (UPI) -- A peasant "time bomb" threatens to stunt China's rise to global economic superiority unless immediate measures are taken to fix the problem, say experts.

The Chinese state has lost much of its legitimacy with the country's rural majority, a turnaround that could have increasingly adverse effects on the long-term socio-economic development of the country, according to Joshua Muldavin, an Asian studies expert at Sarah Lawrence College in New York.

With greater land seizures by the state and reduced levels of rural subsistence, more peasants are having to migrate to urban areas in search of work where disappointment often awaits, making "peasant landlessness ... a time bomb for the state," Muldavin told an audience Thursday at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

"There are two Chinas," he said. One is for investors, and the other is the "rural hinterlands," where official corruption, a growing gap between rich and poor and unemployment led to some 87,000 incidents of unrest in China last year, said Muldavin. It is believed that many more go unreported.

An estimated 70 million landless peasants presently live at the bottom of the world's sixth-largest economy.

"The Chinese Communist Party's priority is industrial and technological development," said John Tkacik, senior research fellow in Asian studies at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C. "If the government was more democratic, it would respond better to the pleas of the people."

China's communist regime gained its legitimacy in a pre-1940 revolution, when a policy of land redistribution garnered them a massive support base in the nation's countryside.

Today the rural population only sees the government siding with the newly rich, said Muldavin, and tensions have begun to boil between peasants and the state, which has violently suppressed a raft of protests in recent months.

In December, at least 10 people were killed and dozens wounded when police fired on a demonstrators in the south-eastern village of Dongzhou. The crowd was demanding better compensation after the state seized land for a wind power plant.

Moreover, with a recent spate of Chinese environmental disasters appearing in the news, "the world as a whole, to a degree, is implicated in this predicament," Muldavin said, citing the presence of the local Walmart and Ikea chains as examples.

Global companies have typically rushed to China to set up factories outside the environmental constraints of their own countries. Using the pollution of groundwater as an example, Muldavin said this sets off a domino effect.

"The choice for local peasants is either they could drink this water, or they could leave," said Muldavin. "Rural China, its environment and people are at the bottom of a global commodity chain ... and we need to tackle the environmentally unsustainable ways in which we consume and produce."

Tkacik said a global environmental partnership between the United States, China, and India to counterbalance the Kyoto Treaty may be in order, but warned that policies must be mutually respected.

"The United States should be careful about what greenhouse policies it adopts with China -- so China does its share and doesn't get a free ride," said Tkacik.

Muldavin said he sees "China as one piece of a much larger global jigsaw."

Problems in China can only be resolved through policy changes and the way that production and consumption focuses on the livelihoods and entitlements of its rural society, he said.

According to Muldavin, the West cannot ignore the problems of China because it is also complicit. "Development shouldn't be judged by the lives of the wealthy," he said, "otherwise a grim, violent, environmentally and socially destructive future awaits us all."

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