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## The World Should Help to Avert Turmoil in China

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Ten years ago, the Chinese government brutally ended months of protest by students, workers, civil servants and their supporters. What has come to be known in the West as the Tiananmen Square massacre lives on as one of the most dramatic events of the late 20th century.

Most analysts have characterized the demonstrations as a "pro-democracy" movement. But they were actually a sign of deep-rooted discontent fueled by the sociopolitical and environmental effects of the market-based reforms implemented in post-Mao China.

A decade later, it is time to reassess this movement, for it has important implications for policy toward the world's most populous country.

Post-Maoist China has experienced impressive economic growth in the last two decades, and has created a whole new class of multimillionaires. But in the process it has created major socioeconomic and environmental problems, particularly in the rural areas where some 800 million Chinese live.

In the last 20 years, the Chinese government decollectivized much of the agricultural sector. It also dismantled many aspects of the social safety net constructed after the Chinese revolution in 1949 that brought the Communist Party to power. The result is a new underclass of rural and urban poor.

As many as 130 million peasant workers are wandering China in search of income opportunities. Unemployment in cities and towns is widespread. Hunger and disease are common.

While collectivist structures in the countryside have collapsed and infrastructure has deteriorated, there has been a rush to achieve greater levels of economic growth. This has had severe environmental costs.

Air and water pollution, deforestation, desertification, soil erosion and other long-term ecological problems have intensified in the past 20 years. As a result, crop yields have gone down significantly, and the number and severity of "natural" disasters, such as the devastating floods of 1998, have increased.

Rather than addressing the structural roots of such problems, the Chinese government scapegoats their manifestations. It blames a host of social ills on the unemployed urban workers, destitute peasants and others who have failed to experience the promised benefits of market reforms. When not blaming the most marginalized sectors of the population, China's leaders point their fingers at the "bad" influences of the West, and of foreigners in general.

The Chinese government is aware that the problems at the root of the mass demonstrations in 1989 have worsened. Across

rural China there have been many violent clashes between peasants and the police, army and other enforcement agencies in the past few years. In the face of growing corruption and nepotism, and intensifying socioeconomic and environmental instability, such anti-government violence will likely continue to increase.

China's problems have been aggravated by the financial turmoil and recession in many countries in East Asia since mid-1997. Yet the U.S. administration has pushed China's entrance into the World Trade Organization on terms that would seriously harm China's peasant majority and add to the instability in rural areas.

It is not in the interests of the West, or of Asia, to have an increasingly unstable China. Its 800 million peasants should not be pushed into a global market economy in which price swings affect distant villages that no longer have government welfare and protective buffers. That will only lead to rising rural discontent at a time of increasing urban unemployment.

The West cannot afford to ignore growing instability in China. Understanding its roots, and those of Tiananmen, is an important first step toward devising pathways of positive change for the lives of one in eight of the world's people.

The writer, a professor of geography and environmental studies at UCLA and co-chair of the Department of International Development Studies, contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune. ???

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