

SCHOOL KILLINGS AND THE RISE OF VIOLENT CRIMES IN CHINA

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Executive Summary

1. In recent months, China has seen six consecutive cases of violent attacks on school children. These incidents have caused 18 dead and more than 50 wounded.
2. The crimes are typically perpetrated by individual unemployed men in their 30s and 40s who have suffered personal failures and become disillusioned with social realities. These attacks are their way of protesting against the society.
3. These weak-prey-on-weak attacks are just the latest episode in China's rise in violent crimes. China's crime rates and public order had been relatively stable during the five years between 2003 and 2008, but in 2009 China experienced a radical rise of 15% over 2008 in the case of violent crimes. Cases of violation of public order experienced an even steeper rise of 20%.
4. China's rapid economic development has been singled out as the cause of the problem. It is believed to have bred a rising sense of social injustice and undermined the livelihood of the socially weak. The lack of legitimate means to secure basic social needs and social justice has led these marginal groups to resort to violent means.
5. The violent crimes have triggered heated public debates on mounting grievances in China today. Many blamed the government for the over-emphasis on economic growth to the negligence of social protection and social justice.
6. The Ministry of Public Security has responded swiftly by stepping up campus security through the deployment of the police force and the conducting of periodic inspections.

7. It is also planning to launch a seven-month long nationwide anti-crime campaign (*yanda*) to crack down on criminal activities in China.
8. However, many observers and specialists have pointed out the need to address the deep social conflict and contradictions, which have been determined as the fundamental causes of these school killings. This view has been lightly echoed by Premier Wen Jiabao in a recent press interview.
9. Meanwhile, other violent attacks have also occurred in a variety of public places, such as court house, passenger train and even business districts. The attacks against judges have, in particular, put the spotlight on the erosion of social justice in China today.
10. The rise of violent crime indicates that China's social stability is under threat. The cost of maintaining social stability and public security has increased fifteen times in merely fifteen years.

SCHOOL KILLINGS AND THE RISE OF VIOLENT CRIMES IN CHINA

ZHAO Litao & HUANG Yanjie*

China's Growing Violent Crimes and Social Responses

- 1.1 China's spectacular economic growth has come at an increasingly high social cost, one of which is the rise in violent crimes. In recent months, China has witnessed six consecutive cases of violent crimes against school children. In total these incidents have caused 18 dead and more than 50 wounded, most victims being primary school and kindergarten children.¹ The eruption of school violence has made a major impact on the society and government, triggering a public debate on China's current social problems.
- 1.2 Most of these highly publicized campus crimes took place in public places – primary schools and kindergartens – and were directed specifically at school children. Out of the six incidents, three occurred in medium-sized and small cities and two in rural areas. The perpetrators of the crimes are all unemployed men in their 30s and 40s who have suffered some misfortunes and become completely disillusioned with social realities. In some cases, the criminals confessed that their act was a form of revenge against social injustice and the venting of frustrations against the society.
- 1.3 The recent cases of school violence are but the latest episode in China's rising violent crimes. China's crime rates and public order were relatively

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¹ The exact death toll has been disputed. At least 18 were killed according to official Xinhua News Agency, but some other sources' estimation was higher since the death toll in the Jiangsu Taixing case was contested.

stable during the five years between 2003 and 2008, but in 2009 China experienced a radical rise of 15% over 2008 in the case of violent crimes and 20% increase in the case of violations of public order. Manslaughter and economically related crimes registered the most phenomenal increase.² It is reported that much of the emerging criminal patterns are associated with marginal social groups living at subsistence levels.³

- 1.4 Economic growth without according social protection has led to the rapid deterioration of the living conditions of the socially weak. Declining share of labor in national income, rapidly rising costs of welfare and exclusive access to upward mobility work in tandem against the poor and disadvantaged. Deprived of legitimate means of securing basic social needs and the lack of basic faith in elemental social justice, marginal groups are apt to apply violence to vent their frustrations. School children, often chosen because of their vulnerability and accessibility, naturally became principal targets of violent crimes.
- 1.5 These recent incidents of violent child-slaughters have triggered heated debates over mounting social grievances in the media and especially on the Internet which represents the voice of mainly the middle class and the young. Most Netizens and observers attribute blatant anti-social crimes to social injustice, recognizing attackers as both victims and criminals. The government is blamed especially for the lack of social justice and social protection for the marginal groups and for the overall economic development model that sacrifices social justice and undermines social harmony.
- 1.6 The crimes also alarmed the authority. The Ministry of Public Security has held several emergency joint conferences to discuss the situations and has deployed more security forces around the campus. Top leaders have also

² http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2010-02/26/content_13050009.htm [accessed on 25 May 2010]

³ Interview with Xin Gaofeng, contributor of Social Bluebook 2010, *Observer Weekly*, 29 Mar 2010

expressed their deep concern. President Hu Jintao recently raised the security issue for school children, while Premier Wen Jiabao, on an earlier television interview, called for proactive government policy measures to deal with the social conflicts behind such crimes.⁴

- 1.7 The rise of violent crimes is only one aspect of rising social instability. China's social stability is constantly being undermined by random violence and heightened social tensions. Tightened security measures and social controls could only curb social instability temporarily, whilst fundamental social injustice and insecurity could only be effectively addressed through wider social reforms.

School Attacks and Public Security Problems

- 2.1 The recent series of weak-attacking-the-weaker cases, in particular, random cases of violent attacks on schoolchildren, deeply shocked the Chinese society. These high-profile violent crimes reflect extreme hardship at the lowest strata of the Chinese society which has profound implications for the underlying social order in an era of great economic and social transformation.
- 2.2 The Nanping attack is the prime example of such attacks. On 23 March, at Nanping county, Fujian province, a 42-year-old former physician, Zheng Minsheng stabbed eight schoolchildren to death and injured six others in front of the gate of an elementary school and in full view of a few hundred stupefied bystanders before he was put down by some residents. The school, which is highly regarded locally, reportedly caters especially for children from middle class and rich families. Zheng, who refused to admit his guilt, reportedly stated his personal misfortunes as blamable for the violent act.⁵

⁴ Transcript of Interview with Wen Jiabao, Phoenix Television, 14 May 2010

⁵ *Jinghua Daily*, 9 April 2010

- 2.3 One month thereafter, on 29 April, a middle-aged man managed to slip into the central town kindergarten at Taixing county, Jiangsu province and stabbed randomly at the school children and teachers in a classroom. Twenty-nine children, two female teachers and a security guard suffered various degrees of injury. The man was stopped by the local residents and handed to the police. The local police and government agencies immediately blocked the site and prohibited media reports from giving detailed medical conditions of the victims. Even parents and relatives were barred from seeing their children during the first few days of the incident. Official sources revealed no death but a few were seriously injured.⁶ The initial blockage of information in this case led to open protests of thousands of local residents. In court, Xu Yuyuan, the perpetrator, confessed to his strong anti-social sentiments induced by unhappiness and frustration at work and with family life as chief motivation for the crime.⁷
- 2.4 Within two weeks of the Jiangsu incident, another case of child slaughtering occurred at a small rural town in Hanzhong city, Shaanxi province. Forty-eight-year-old Wu Huanming stormed into a classroom of a kindergarten, killing the schoolmistress, her aged mother and seven children, and leaving eleven others wounded, before committing suicide in his own apartment.⁸ This is the fifth and the second most deadly incident of child slaughtering after the Nanping attack. The local security bureau later reported that the attacker had experienced business failures. The attacker, who was also suffering from a number of chronic illnesses and leading an unhappy family life over the last few years, was said to be primarily driven by stress and psychiatric disorders.
- 2.5 The disillusionment of the three perpetrators echoed the hardship of the other attackers in other similar cases of violent assaults on children in

⁶ The official death toll, which is not open to public independent investigations, has been disputed by Netizens. Some unverified local sources put the death toll to as high as 11. The government cover-up prompted a demonstration in local main streets in the evening of 29 April.

⁷ <http://society.people.com.cn/GB/42733/11489081.html> [Accessed on 20 May 2010]

⁸ http://www.sn.xinhuanet.com/2010-05/12/content_19762910.htm [Accessed on 11 May 2010]

China in recent months. The arrested attackers confessed in court to their loss of hope in life and expressed intense anti-social sentiments as principal motivation of violent attacks on the society. In two of the six cases, the attackers committed suicide before the police arrived at the scene.

- 2.6 These highly publicized cases of school killings are just a tip of the iceberg in the evolving scene of violence in the Chinese society. According to the Social Governance Bluebook released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the number of violent criminal cases rose by 15% in 2009, reversing the trend of gradual and stable decline in the last five years. Cases of violent crimes involving random attacks on vulnerable victims are widely reported.
- 2.7 The worsening public security situation is also evident in public survey results. In January 2010, a joint survey carried out by Horizon Research, People's Daily Online and Sohu Net just before this year's plenary session of the National People's Congress on public concerns suggests that public security has become the third major concern for residents after high costs of living and environmental risks.⁹ Another Horizon Group survey on public assessment of public policies also indicated a deterioration of public security in general public perception. This heightened sense of insecurity could be attributed to the frequent mentioning of criminal activities in the media and neighborhood, the increase in criminal cases and the perceived lack of preventive measures.¹⁰
- 2.8 As the author of the Bluebook rightly argued, the rising tide of violent crimes is likely to continue over the course of this year. Underlying such public violence against the weak are social dynamics such as massive unemployment, relative impoverishment, widening income gap and the sharpening of social conflicts. When underprivileged social groups are

⁹ <http://2010lianghui.people.com.cn/GB/182155/11059148.html> [accessed on 30 May 2010]

¹⁰ Public Assessment on Public Service Provision for 2009, Horizon Survey Group, Nov 2009

being pushed toward the basic line of forbearance, acts of violence are likely to emerge as the only options for the deeply dissatisfied.

Underlying Causes and Implications of Violent Crimes

- 3.1 Recent cases of school killings have highlighted worsening public security conditions and a host of underlying social problems in China today. In the aftermath of this series of landmark individual violence against the society, media and academic circles in China increasingly focus their attention on the causes of violent crimes. Many observers point to the lack of basic protection for the disadvantaged social groups and the absence of effective means for addressing their grievances as immediate causes of their crimes. But at a deeper structural level, as the overwhelming negative social responses to such events further demonstrate, the problems involve a deep rooted sense of social injustice.
- 3.2 China's great economic transformation has been achieved at very heavy social costs. With rising costs and cut-throat competition in all walks and aspects of life, social groups with no clear comparative advantages in the labor market are finding life increasingly stressful and burdensome. When one is crowded out of the labor market, the stress can induce psychological problems and increase the odds of violence. This is testified by the fact that all attackers in recent cases of school attacks have been deprived of property and jobs.
- 3.3 The socioeconomic position of weak social groups is further threatened by the state which often takes more than it gives back. Socially and economically deprived individuals are most likely to be politically weak as well, which makes them more vulnerable to any grabbing hand of the local state. According to media reports, Xu Yuyuan, the perpetrator of the Taixing kindergarten killing, has developed intense anti-social sentiments primarily from strong and unvented frustrations over the local government's demolishing of his houses and the meager compensation he received.

- 3.4 In recent years, as competition in China's labor market becomes fiercer and protective social policies remain inadequate, those who failed to make it through cutting-edge competitions have their situations aggravated by the lack of social protection and welfare provision brought about by the marketization of health care, education and housing. Losers are likely to be marginalized in society and surviving at subsistence levels. The school attacker in Shaanxi is reported to have suffered from severe chronic medical conditions without the financial means to access proper health care. Deng Minsheng, the Nanping attacker, was reportedly unable to basic housing despite his skills and 20 years' experience serving as a community doctor.
- 3.5 Social groups suffering from rising economic and social pressures in contemporary China tend to suffer from mental health problems of various kinds, a situation made worse by the lack of treatment in China, which in turn predisposes them to violent behaviors. Ding Xueliang, a sociology professor at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, argued that the lack of treatment for patients with mental health problems might have contributed to such incidences since only 5% of patients with mental conditions are properly treated in China.¹¹
- 3.6 The academia tends to attribute such violence to socio-psychological problems while public opinion focuses on social injustice as the ultimate cause of tragedies, since the attackers, mostly victims of social injustice themselves, simply do not have the capacity to take their claims to the top leadership. In recent years, there is emerging consensus that reform has made the weak weaker and the powerful even more powerful in social, economic and political terms. The erosion of social injustice comes from a variety of sources and works at various levels, most prominently in the excessive abuse of public power. Many observers believe that government officials will be the likely target of more deadly attacks. Among the social responses that the attacks generated is a renewed wave of collective

¹¹ Austin Ramzy, "China's Soul Searching as School Attacks Continue", *Times*, 12 May 2010; Sing Lee, "Mental Illness in China", *The Lancet*, 13 June 2009.

grievances against public authorities, which are perceived to be the prime cause of social injustice.

3.7 As Premier Wen pointed out, recent school attacks are consummate signs of deep rooted social tensions and conflicts.¹² Some school attackers have already confessed in court that their action is a revenge on society which is perceived to have caused the hopelessness of their present conditions. The school attackers' deep dissatisfaction with social realities finds resonance in the overwhelming societal response to violent incidents. Moreover, injustice and lack of accountability on the part of the public authorities create public distrust of the government. In consequence, the disillusioned victims of injustice often turn to violent means rather than adopt a more rational approach to seeking justice.¹³

3.8 Although the current pattern of individualized anti-social violence is most unlikely to evolve into large scale social unrest, the rise in violent crimes against weak social groups in recent months nevertheless raise concerns over China's social stability. China has long experienced sporadic and individual cases of violent attacks against the current social order. The highly publicized cases of Hu Wenhai and Yang Jia are among the most prominent precursors to the current attacks.¹⁴ Differing from ordinary crimes with clearly targeted victims, violent crimes such as school attacks that are more randomly expressed and interpreted as attacks on the society in general, suggests a more profound breakdown in the inner social order.

3.9 The recent school killings are but one aspect of the evolving social problems facing China today according to Sun Liping, a leading

¹² http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-05/14/content_9847269.htm [Accessed on 13 June 2010]

¹³ Lu Hongwei, "School Violence as Victim of Social Crisis" [Xiaoyuan Caian wei Shehui Weiiji Shounan], Nan Fengchuang, vol. 10, 2010

¹⁴ On 26 Oct 2001, Hu Wenhai, a peasant in Jinzhong County, Shanxi Province, stabbed and killed the whole family and relatives of a corrupt village head, who embezzled the life money of the villager and denied him of any channel of appeals. On 1 July 2008, Yang Jia, a 28-year old jobless youth from Beijing assaulted a district police in Shanghai and killed six police personnel in take revenge of brutal acts suffered at the hand of Shanghai police on a visit to Shanghai in December 2007.

sociologist and expert on social problems in contemporary China. His recent study suggests that China's social crisis will not develop into full-fledged socio-political turmoil, but will lead to the dysfunctioning and destruction of all basic social institutions, such as interpersonal trust, moral values and violence containment mechanisms.¹⁵ Weak and deprived social groups are especially vulnerable. The loss of the basic societal defense line for many leads directly to the rise of randomized and individualized cases of violent crimes.

Government's Response to Increasing Violence

4.1 As repeated school killings pose a severe and immediate challenge to public security and social stability, the government has reacted promptly to the situation. Zhou Yongkang, member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau and person-in-charge of law and order, has declared the school security campaign as a major political task. The Ministry of Public Security, in an effort to prevent similar crimes and placate the public, has ordered more resources to be diverted to school security and sanctions more resolute police action in case of emergency. In early May, Meng Jianzhu, the Minister of Public Security, personally led an inspection team to Shanxi to check the new security measures against similar attacks in school campus.¹⁶ This commitment is reaffirmed by a call from President Hu Jintao to safeguard children at all costs during a public function in celebration of International Children's Day.¹⁷

4.2 At the provincial level, some local governments have already stepped up campus security efforts by deploying more police personnel to schools. Beijing municipal government has taken the lead by deploying 6000 to 7000 police officers during rush hours and 13,000 sets of anti-attack

¹⁵ Sun Liping, "The Biggest Threat is Not Social Turmoil but Social Decay", [Zhongguo Shehui Zuida Weixie bushi Shehui Dongdang ershi Shehui Kuibai], *Nanfang Ribao*, 26 Feb 2009

¹⁶ *China Daily*, 17 May 2010

¹⁷ <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/news/2010/05-31/2314761.shtml> [Accessed on 1 June 2010]

security equipment to buttress campus security.¹⁸ Similar campaigns to enhance campus security and preempt similar school attacks are launched by other provinces. Campus security conferences are also held at most city-level municipalities and party headquarters. A responsibility system will be installed to punish local leaders in whose jurisdiction school killing occurs. In less than a month, campus security attains an unprecedented level of policy prominence.

- 4.3 The fear that media coverage on school killings may generate a destabilizing effect has prompted local governments in affected regions and the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP to filter information and resort to media control. After the media exposure of the Nanping incident, local authorities in Jiangsu and Shaanxi promptly cordoned off the area and blocked information of the victims and attackers to prevent copycat attacks from taking place in the future. The Central Propaganda Department issued a policy circular to all national and local media requiring them to follow strictly the official reports from Xinhua News Agency and refrain from over-focusing on the school killings.¹⁹
- 4.4 The government handling of school killings and the preemptive measures adopted have so far met with mixed social responses. While most residents supported such measures, public opinion remains highly critical of government policies, referring to government inaction towards deeper underlying causes of such violent incidents. The government's informational control, though somewhat justifiable on the ground of preventing copycat school attacks, has also invited criticism from Netizens who took it as an infringement of basic rights to access public information. The criticism is particularly acute in the Taixing incident when the government blocked media and all public access to any information about victims, including parents of the children injured.

¹⁸ http://www.bj.xinhuanet.com/bjpd_sdzx/2010-05/05/content_19701699.htm, [Accessed on 20 May 2010]

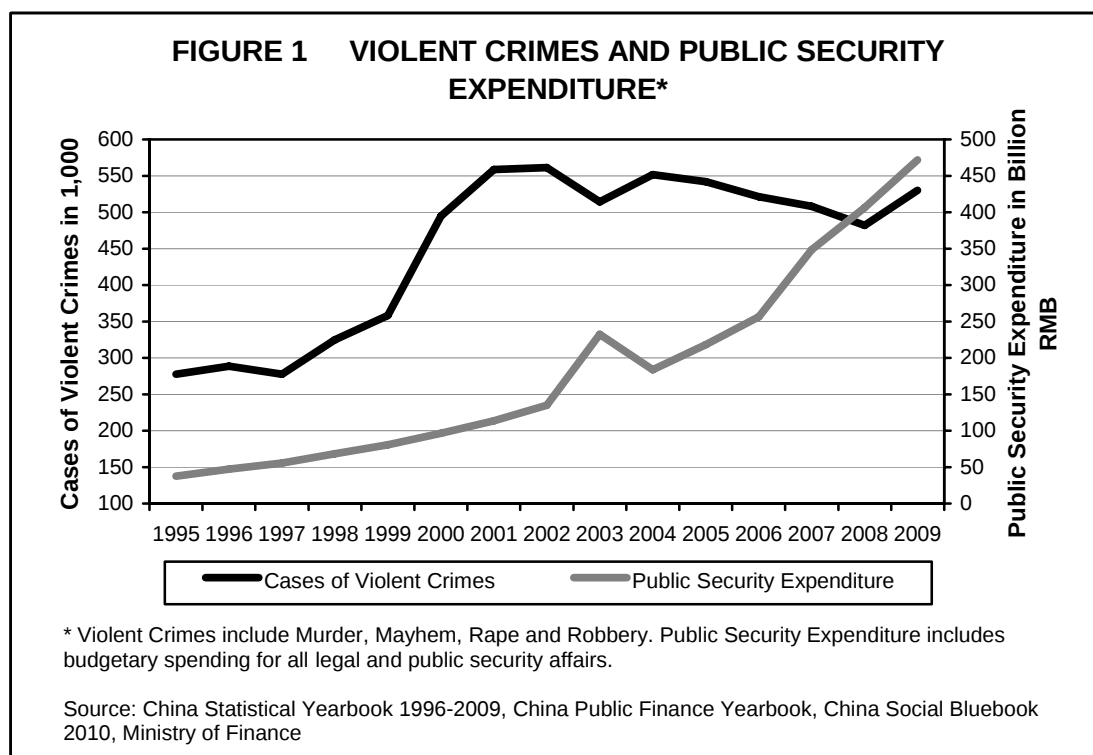
¹⁹ Lauren Frayer, *China Censors News on Deadly School Stabbings*, American Online News, 13 May 2010]

- 4.5 The top leadership has so far refrained from commenting on the underlying causes. Indeed, only Premier Wen Jiabao mentioned the need to address the deeper underlying social problems in his interview with Phoenix TV, a Hong Kong based news media. There were neither any concrete policy follow-ups nor further hints from other top leaders on the cause of the school attacks. One possible explanation is the fear that further discussions may generate renewed social tensions and invite more societal questioning of government's policies.
- 4.6 While police enforcement and inspection will probably help to disperse fears of campus insecurity, the measure on the whole is regarded as inadequate in addressing the larger public security dilemma. For one thing, it is far too costly to deploy police forces to all schools in the poor areas, particularly to kindergartens that are not part of the public education system. Besides, the killers can always target other victims.²⁰ Given the size of the country and randomness of the crime, any movement-like effort to root out such violent crimes may prove futile.
- 4.7 As a systemic response to the rise of violent crimes in general, the Ministry of Public Security announced on 13 June 2010 that it will officially launch a seven-month long nationwide anti-criminal campaign (*yanda*).²¹ The all-out campaign is not without precedents. Similar campaigns had been carried out whenever there was a significant hike in criminal cases as in the years of 1983, 1996 and 2001. If the forthcoming campaign was to follow earlier cases, it will invariably be characterized by rampant crackdown, rapid meting out of punishments and more frequent usage of harsh punishments, especially the death penalty.

²⁰ In fact, similar random killings had occurred in other public places. One such attack took place in the crowded business street in Foshan, Guangdong, when a young man in his 20s randomly stabbed six young girls before throwing himself down from a nearby building. In another case, a female passenger in her 40s stabbed 9 fellow passengers in their sleeping berths at random at 2am when all passengers were asleep a railway train travelling from Harbin to Mudanjiang, Heilongjiang.

²¹ http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2010-06/13/c_12219848.htm [Accessed on 14 June 2010]

4.8 In China, social problems like violent anti-social crimes are regarded as minor threats to social stability and treated with short-run measures which usually incur more public security spending. This approach has worked so far since 2003 in keeping down violent crimes. As a result, total public security expenditure has increased fifteen folds since 1995 (Figure 1). Public security spending expanded to RMB476 billion in 2009, a surge of 16.5% from 2008. In the year 2010, government spending in public security is expected to increase further. Central government spending on public security in particular saw a staggering increase of 47.5% over 2009, making it a major item on both central and local budgets.²²



4.9 The high-handed approach to public security backed by increasing public security spending is becoming ineffective due to its failure to address the underlying social causes which will probably induce more social protests, according to an investigation on China's social instability by a group of

²² Central and Local Government Budget, 2009; Central and Local Government Budgetary Plan, 2010; Ministry of Finance

Qinghua sociologists.²³ As the resurgence of violent crimes during the last year indicated, more public security spending has not generated better social stability and public security. Assuming public security is becoming more costly to maintain, it is bound to cause fiscal problems.

4.10 Indeed, more high-profile attacks, in particular against the judges, have emerged even as the government is urging for more public security provisions. On 1 June, a bank guard managed to slip into a county level courthouse in Yongzhou, Hunan and killed three judges and seriously injuring another four with a mini-submachine gun. The killer was allegedly wronged by unfair court rulings and currently suffering from incurable diseases.²⁴ In another case, on 10 June, six judges in Wuzhou, Guangxi were severely burned in a sulfuric acid attack when enforcing a court verdict against a couple in a business dispute.²⁵ Recent incidents of violence against judges has given rise to serious social reflections on the public security and social justice situation in China today, as Netizens are seen to have expressed overwhelming sympathy and even approval for the attackers.

4.11 A symptom of China's multifaceted social problems, school killings, among other violent crimes, suddenly captured public attention in the last few months. Such random killings are not isolated cases of violence, but a clear indication of a systemic crisis at the basic social rubric. Though the central government has devoted more security resources and increased public security spending to deal with the rise in violent crimes, such measures are viewed by most as helpful but inadequate.

4.12 Alternatively, as indicated by some scholars, systemic reforms to promote social justice and render public power accountable should be implemented

²³ Institutionalizing Interests Expression as Means to Long-term Social Stability [Yi Liyibiaoda Zhiduhua Shixian Shehui Changzhijuan], Qinghua University Research Team

²⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/02/world/asia/02china.html> [Accessed on 3 Jun 2010]

²⁵ http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2010-06/09/c_12199936.htm [Accessed on 10 Jun 2010]

to address the deep-seated causes.²⁶ While the wave of schooling killings could be controlled for the time being, the rise of violent crimes and subsequent social unrest are likely to prevail if the underlying social causes remain largely unaddressed.

²⁶ Yu Jianrong, Harsh Lessons from Nanping Incidents, [Nanping Xuean de Jingshi], Nan Fengchuang, Vo.9, 2010