

## EARTHQUAKE AFTERMATH

## Grieving parents consider legal action

Safety of school buildings probed  
Big test for more open government

By Tom Mitchell  
in Sichuan

The parents of children school at a school collapse in the Chinese earthquake are seeking legal help and steps to pressure officials they hold responsible for sub-standard building work.

Parents at Juyuan middle school, where 200 pupils and

teachers died, aim to hire local representatives. With the overall official push south coast from the May 12 quake at 4.75 and rising, grieving parents from a potentially powerful lobby. Anger has been growing over the collapse of several schools and authorities in Sichuan province have promised to investigate central standards at the wrecked buildings. The education ministry has also promised to assess school safety and "severely punish" anyone found to have cut corners.

However, few details have

been issued about the investigations, in what has become a big test of the more open style of government that Chinese leaders have adopted over the earthquake quake. The provincial investigations have accompanied a wave of rhetoric from Beijing about the need to avoid corruption in the relief effort. Wang Shengjun, chief justice of the Sichuan supreme court, has told courts in Sichuan to crack down hard on any cases of corruption.

The Juyuan school disaster on the outskirts of

Dujiangyan, a small city south of the provincial capital, Chengde, was not the worst in terms of overall death toll. But because few other buildings in the area collapsed, parents blame shoddy construction. The school building was always dangerous, said Fu Xiaohu, who added that she and other parents had been concerned about its large concrete balconies. "We asked the [local] school authority about this problem, but they always said, 'Don't worry,'" Ms Fu's daughter, Yang Jing, who

would have turned 16 last week, died in the collapse. Similar questions are being asked about the collapse of Xinjiang primary school, in central Dujiangyan, where 238 children and teachers were killed. Xinjiang's rains are surrounded by commercial and residential buildings that are still standing.

In Dujiangyan, a mountain town closer to the epicentre, more than 1,800 pupils are believed to have perished at the Number One middle school.

But because of the widespread destruction in Bei-

tingnan, parents are more upset with grief than anger. Many have lost several family members and are living in tent camps further down the valley. Two mothers, Jing Dunan and Zhang Yumei, who are staying in a refugee camp, both have children missing and pressed down after the Beifengnan school collapse. While they suspect that poor construction may have been a contributing factor, they are occupied by a daily struggle to survive. Their houses were toppled by the

temper and then flooded by the rising waters of the Tangjiazui quake lake. Parents have thus far contracted their ire on local rather than central government officials. But Beijing's political position remains delicate. Grieving numbers of Sichuan residents, relief volunteers and even soldiers with personal connection to the dead children, have been making solemn pilgrimages to the ruined schools. Additional reporting by Yang Jie and Geoff Dyer

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## S Korea removes ban on US beef

By Song Jung-ha in Seoul

South Korea yesterday said it had lifted its ban on imports of US beef and would immediately resume quarantine inspections.

The agriculture minister said US beef would be allowed into the country for the first time in more than four years.

"This government will thoroughly conduct quarantine inspections of US beef to ensure public health," Chang Won-chun, agriculture minister, told reporters.

South Korea was the third largest importer of US beef until it suspended imports in 2003, after an outbreak of mad cow disease. The country lifted the ban in 2006 but reinstated it last October after banned parts were found in US shipments.

The current ban was to have been lifted on May 23, but was delayed following daily street protests by thousands of South Koreans who believed a deal was reached with Washington without enough safeguards against mad cow disease.

The main opposition United Democratic party yesterday said it would launch massive rallies against the restriction and civic groups also vowed to expand street protests. Several hundred people have been detained by police in downtown Seoul in recent days as rallies led to clashes with riot police.

Yesterday's announcement threatened to derail a wider trade liberalisation pact with the US as opposition parties have said they will not ratify it until the beef deal has been renegotiated. The government had hoped a wider bilateral trade deal with the US would be ratified by parliament this month.

Tackling the food crisis, Robert Zoellick, Page 9

## 'Just emperor' escapes the people's blame

China's leaders are seen as having their good intentions thwarted by venal local officials, write Tom Mitchell and Mure Dickie

The notion of a "just emperor" whose benign will is thwarted by local officials was a recent staple of Chinese political tradition — and it lives on today among the tragedy of the collapsed school in the south-western city of Dujiangyan.

Parents holding a vigil outside the Juyuan middle school, where 200 students and teachers died, cannot contain their rage at the city's bureaucrats they hold responsible for the allegedly shoddy construction that led to the school's collapse.

"We have come to mourn our children," says Zhao Weibing, holding the portrait of her twin daughters Yang and Yanli — whose birth in 1997 was a particular blessing in a country where urban families are generally limited to one child. "In Dujiangyan it was many children who died. Why not government buildings?"

Bureaucrats draped across the school's ruins echo this theme, demanding an inves-

tigation into the "murderers" responsible for its alleged "lax" construction. But emotion Wen Shaoqun, China's "royal premier" who visited the site just hours after the quake, and the parents' "raw selfishness." "When Shaoqun comes about us," says Peng Xia, who lost her daughter, Xia Xiaolin, died at Juyuan. "Central government policies are good but not implemented at local level. It's his [his] fault."

This recent notion of a just emperor, or mandarin, is a common trope and offers to govern for the benefit of the people is undermined by venal local functionaries, has political implications today.

The parents' willingness to dissociate their leaders in Beijing from the local officials they blame shows how the government contains any wider political fallout.

Steve Tang, a political scientist at St Antony's College, Oxford, says the school's collapse has damaged the party's



A woman cries for a child who died when a school collapsed in Dujiangyan. Parents claim construction standards were not high enough

and left 30,000 more missing and 30,000 dead. Hence, venal local officials, even though the extent of school collapses could sign post systemic rather than individual shortcomings.

Parents of children who died at Juyuan school, like from downtown Dujiangyan, said at Xinjiang primary school in the city centre are baffled. While many buildings, including schools, were badly damaged in the earthquake, few others collapsed.

At Xinjiang, where 238 people and staff died, the circumstantial evidence is even more damning. The devastated school buildings is blamed on all sides by commercial MORE ON FT.COM

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and residential buildings that are still standing. "Of course, such is a just if enough people conclude the notion of a just emperor is, in fact, more myth. The schools have already become potent symbols, as shown by the steady trickle of visitors they receive. More than two weeks after the quake, it is not just jour-

nalists and journalists who descend on the ruins. Solon groups of civilian relief volunteers and even soldiers, with no personal connection to the tragedy, are also drawn to the site. Some gift little pictures, leave gifts of food and beer in respect of the dead. Such displays from compassionate strangers are a comfort

to the parents. It was one of the reasons they wanted to Mr Wen — he at least came while they say local officials still keep their distance. "They haven't even come to say their respects to our children," says Lu Guangming, whose 10-year-old son, Luo Dan, perished at Juyuan. "They still send police to monitor us."

## China and Taiwan talk tourism

Non-stop charter services on agenda  
Island looks for Beijing peace pact

By Kathrin Hill in Taipei

China and Taiwan will next month resume a dialogue that was suspended for almost a decade, with talks on tourism and direct flights between the two countries.

Lai Shih-suan, Taiwan's China policy, co-ordinator, yesterday said she expected the parties to sign an agreement to start non-stop charter flights between China and Taiwan every weekend and bring up to 2,000 Chinese tourists to the island from July.

Taiwan has direct flights across the strait, and China bans its citizens from visit-

ing the island directly as tourists. The two sides have only limited non-stop charters during some Chinese holidays. Taipei hopes non-stop flights will be resumed to daily services by December, and be replaced with a full range of services by next summer.

Taiwan also wants to resume bilateral deals on trade, investment and banking supervision and eventually sign a peace agreement with Beijing. But Ma Ying-jeou, Taiwan's president, has said he would not negotiate unification because the Taiwanese want to keep their status as a de facto independent, democratic state.

The talks could be the starting point for a rapprochement between the two sides, which economies have become closely intertwined but whose governments

have refused to speak to each other for most of the 30 years of conflict. A body set up by the Chinese government in 1992 as a cover for negotiations with the self-ruled island invited its Taiwanese counterparts yesterday to meet in Taipei for four days of consultations from June 11.

Although the People's Republic of China has never set its territory and therefore its name, it claims the democratic island as part of its territory and therefore its name in a way Taipei formally declares independence.

"[The] agree to your proposal to resume the contacts and negotiations between our two foundations on the basis of the '1992 consensus'," China's Association for Relations Across the Strait (AARAS) Straits Exchange Foundation in a letter yesterday.

The 1992 consensus refers to an understanding that there is only one China but the two sides have their own interpretations of it. The two governments had circumscribed their contradictory claims with regard to Taiwan's sovereignty and started their first talks through Self and Anti in the 1980s. But China broke off this dialogue in 1999.

Taiwan upgraded its full-year economic growth forecast to 4.8 per cent from 4.3 per cent yesterday, reflecting the island's strong export performance. In the first quarter, gross domestic product grew by 6.1 per cent.

CROSS-STRAIT LINK

Warning relations face chill of no autonomy pact at [www.ft.com/asia](http://www.ft.com/asia)

## Caste protests spill over to New Delhi

By Arun Jey in New Delhi

Violent protests spread to the outskirts of New Delhi yesterday as thousands from the so-called "backward" caste, caste Mahesh, march on roads to the capital and crippled rail lines as they demand a larger share of state jobs and college quotas.

Thousands of police and military forces were deployed to contain violent demonstrations that have spilled over from the state of Rajasthan to neighbouring Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and the District of Delhi.

More than 80 protesters died in clashes between security forces and Gujarat since the riot began last Friday in Rajkot.

The violence highlights heated dispute in India over government jobs and university seats reserved for disadvantaged groups from low castes and tribal groups. Similar caste Mahesh protests a year ago left 25 dead.

The Gujarat are classified as India as a "backward" caste. But they want lower status as a "scheduled tribes" to qualify for larger quotas of government jobs and university seats reserved for people further down India's complex social hierarchy.

The Gujarat rejected a government committee that voted against classifying them as a scheduled tribe and instead pledging to spend billions more on improving education, health care and infrastructure.

The Rajasthan government must restore the mood of the people and not delay the implementation of quotas for Gujjars, Avasihs, Sindh Bhadras, a top Gujarat leader, said.

India's constitution mandates that 7.5 per cent of public sector jobs at government colleges be reserved for scheduled tribes and 15 per cent for castes formerly known as "untouchables".

The violence does a fresh blow to Jaipur, the historic capital of Rajasthan, which is already reeling from a sharp slowdown in tourism after a recent terrorist attack.

A series of bomb blasts in the city's markets killed more than 60 people earlier this month.

Travelers have been stranded on highways and highways in parts of Rajasthan have been shut down because of the agitation.

The Gujarat are mobilising demands that the state's BJP ruling party grant them scheduled tribe status as a way to resolve the 2003 state election.

The Gujjars were originally nomads from central Asia who took to cow herding when they settled in India. They will be divided into tribes, communities should be made with no settled agriculture and spent on mass tourism society.

Many critics say the quota policy is a way to shore up political support from the 100,000 members of "backward" castes rather than helping those in need.

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