

China Report by Mary Burdman

China hit by record floods

Large areas could suffer the worst floods in 60 years this summer, and collapsing infrastructure will not hold up.

Floods killed at least 33 people and affected over 2 million in Hunan province in south-central China, the *China Daily* reported July 6. One day later, it reported that more than 30 counties in neighboring Jiangxi province in southeastern China were hit with heavy flooding, affecting 1 million people. Since mid-June, floods have swept Zhejiang province on the east coast, where at least 40 were killed and another 30 are missing. Rains 50% higher than normal fell on the province. Heavy rains have put the rivers south of the Yangtze 1 to 3 meters above warning level already.

In Guangdong province, the locale of the "miraculous" economic growth of the "special economic zones," at least 14 people were killed and 735,000 left homeless by floods in mid-June. Overall, officials report that floods have killed some 140 persons.

This could be only the beginning. An "emergency squad" of 1.8 million youths is preparing for the Yellow River to flood. The Yellow River, whose floods have killed millions in the past, has not overflowed its banks since 1949.

China's highest-level officials have been warning for months about the danger of flooding during July and August along China's biggest waterways. On June 1, State Councillor Chen Jungshen, newly appointed to be commander in chief of the State Flood-Control Headquarters, which itself was just reestablished in May, warned a special conference on flood control that China's seven largest waterways, including the Yangtze (one of the world's greatest rivers), the Yellow River (Hwang He), the Huai

He, Hai He, and Songhua Jiang, "presently cannot withstand a devastating flood, such as is expected to occur every 60 years," the official *China Daily* reported.

"China is facing a grim situation in the coming flood season beginning next month, as major problems in the country's flood control system remain unsolved," Chen said. What that actually means, when not expressed in official governmentese, is that China's vital flood control infrastructure, like her railroad, energy, and irrigation infrastructure, has been totally neglected under the Deng Xiaoping economic "reforms" begun in 1978. Even under Chairman Mao, when the communes maintained water control systems, more attention was given to maintaining water management infrastructure, a cornerstone of China's economy and civilization for millennia. After the "household responsibility" system was initiated in 1978, local officials resorted to taxing the peasantry to maintain rural infrastructure, but—as the outrage of China's peasants now attests—most of the taxes squeezed out of the peasants went only into the officials' pockets.

The results were seen in July 1991: The Yangtze and Huai He valleys in central China, vital agricultural areas and among the most densely populated areas in China (and that means on earth), suffered devastating floods. Although official Beijing reports claimed 2,000 died, Hongkong papers reported that as many as 800,000 could have been killed, the worst toll since the floods of the 1930s. The official press warned of "calamities," and proclaimed "war

against the floods."

Beijing is forced to do that again this summer. The reestablished flood control agency sent out groups to inspect the Yellow, Huai He, and Hai He river valleys in June, headed by Minister of Water Resources Niu Maosheng and two vice ministers. They found, according to the official Xinhua News Agency, that "many anti-flood projects have become too old to withstand major floods, and some are in a state of disrepair." The lack of sustainable flood control facilities, especially around the cities, has made the areas vulnerable to flood "disasters," the officials warned. Minister Niu Maosheng called on the government to double the annual anti-flood budget, which has remained at the same level—\$35 million—since 1980, while China spends 10 times that amount every year to repair already damaged water control infrastructure. But now, there is a new problem. The soaring costs of building materials kept expenditures on repairs down to only \$120 million last year.

In addition to the loss of human life, precious cropland is in grave danger from the floods. In southern China, floods have devastated some 320,000 hectares of land, and at least one-third of crops were washed away. In Hunan, more than 117,000 hectares of crops were destroyed.

Beijing will have to get more than China's rivers under control. The *China Daily* reported June 22 that peasants have been plundering the levees and flood-monitoring facilities on the Yellow River, and attacking the officials who try to stop them. The "vandalism" by the desperate peasants—who have been fighting officials for the right to farm government-owned land along the river—could "paralyze" flood control operations, officials warned.