

# Inside the Pitchfork Rebellion

Across China's heartland, anger at local authorities is growing violent as protests spread. Is this the birth of a revolution?

By HANNAH BEECH

**T**HE MAN IS ALMOST TOO SCARED TO TALK. "I am just a farmer," he whispers, shortly after the police had descended on his village of Panlong in China's southern Guangdong province. "I know I don't matter." But what he has witnessed does. In mid-January, the man joined a remarkable protest against the local government's decision to seize communal farmland and lease it to a foreign investor. For several days, more than 1,000 villagers gathered near the disputed land, brandishing pitchforks and blocking a highway.

But the brief exercise in free expression ended in tragedy. As dusk fell on January 14, men armed with electric batons poured out of police vans and attacked the farmers. Villagers say a 13-year-old girl who tried to hide behind a woodpile was beaten to death, and they estimate that 20 or so others were seriously injured. (A spokesperson from nearby Zhongshan City claims the girl died of a heart attack.) The clash was barely reported within China, but few locals believe it will be the last. Says the witness, who doesn't want his name used for fear of official retribution: "The local government has lost the hearts of the people."

China's leaders had better try to win them back. Violent local protests are convulsing the Chinese countryside with ever greater frequency—and Beijing has proved unable to quell the unrest. By the central government's own count, there were 87,000 "public-order disturbances" in 2005, up from 10,000 in 1994. Many of China's 900 million rural inhabitants are farmers, who have little legal or political leverage. They have borne a disproportionate share of the side effects of China's growth, from environmental degradation to misrule by local party officials more eager to line their pockets than provide basic services. Income disparity between the urban rich and the rural poor is at its widest since the People's Republic was founded in 1949. "What China has now is the worst of a planned economy and the worst of capitalism," says Christine Wong, a University of Washington professor who studies local governance in China. "The farmers are the ones who are losing out the most."

Their anger could have seismic consequences. Revolutions in China have a history of springing from rural discontent. The Communist Party rose to power on the strength of its pledge to protect the rights of farmers who joined its fight to overthrow the landlord class. The current crop of Communist leaders is aware that rural unrest could spark

political mayhem, especially when cell phones and the Internet can connect citizens with the click of a button. In some cases, such as in Panlong, local officials have resorted to violence to suppress the uprisings, which has only incited more rage. In response, President Hu Jintao announced plans to give billions of dollars in central-government aid to farmers. "If farmers are rich, then the country will be prosperous," he said. "If villages are stable, then the society will also be stable."

But promises from Beijing alone won't stem the discontent. Today, China is one of



the only countries that puts the responsibility for health care, social security and education in local governments' hands—but the focus on generating foreign investment rather than supplying basic services has left much of rural China, where 70% of the population lives, in a dire condition. Millions live on the edge of destitution, without access to sustainable jobs or medical care. Although Beijing regularly pumps out well-meaning initiatives, most are unfunded mandates that are ignored by local officials. “We talk to the central government, and it’s clear they want to reverse these huge inequalities,” says the University of Washington’s Wong, who also works for the World Bank as a consultant on China. “But fixing the problem is like pushing a piece of string through five levels of government.”

Peasants might not be so upset if cash from confiscated fields were used to build new schools or clean water projects. Instead, they complain, the money is often diverted by local officials. And few corruption investigations lead to sentencing. Farmers who once trusted the central government’s ability to fix problems find their faith in the system dimming and their anger rising. “They had been told that reform was coming, so they were patient,” says Philip Brown, an economist who studies rural China. “But now they see that the reforms don’t go far enough, and they think, *This is what we’ve been waiting for?*” The official Chinese media, which has tried to educate farmers on their basic rights, only heightens that disenchantment. “The media can’t report on the bad things that happen to you, and so it overreports on the good things,” says Mary Gallagher, a political scientist at the University of Michigan. “And that causes unrealistic expectations.”

The question is whether Beijing can address rural discontent before it hardens into a wider, more violent agrarian revolt. The central government

has experimented with programs that channel money more directly to the people meant to receive it—one project involves wiring teachers’ salaries to post-office accounts instead of leaving pay at the discretion of local officials. But the authorities’ main tactic for stopping the spread of rural protests remains preventing word about them from getting out. Since the January 14 protest, the uncensored satellite feed from Hong Kong to Panlong has been cut. And journalists who try to get close to the village have been detained.

China may not be able to stifle the voices of protest much longer. About 30 miles from Panlong, in the village of Lishan, a farmer named Liang Beidai is one of the growing number who are ready to fight back. Three Lishan residents were injured in February after protests of land seizures turned bloody. “We are prepared to die for [our rights],” says Liang. If angry farmers truly lose their sense of fear, it may ultimately be Beijing that is running scared. ■

**Questions**

1. What sparked the recent protest in Panlong?
2. What is Chinese authorities’ main strategy for preventing the spread of rural protests?

