



## Can Authoritarian Regimes Still Quarantine the News?

by Mark R. Elliott

On Jan. 10, 2004, World Health Organization (WHO) investigators examined a restaurant in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, China, as a possible source of transmission of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome). A waitress from this restaurant who may have the SARS virus served dishes of civets, the cat-like mammal which is a suspected SARS carrier. On Jan. 4 Chinese authorities had ordered the slaughter of thousands of civets, related to the mongoose, for fear of a second outbreak of SARS. The hospitalization of the Guangzhou waitress follows hard on China's acknowledgement Dec. 27 of its first probable SARS case since the WHO announced the end of the SARS epidemic last July. A 32-year-old television producer entered a Guangdong Province hospital Dec. 20, was moved to a quarantine ward two days later, and was tentatively diagnosed with SARS on the 24<sup>th</sup>. It is now certain that he contracted SARS, but recovered and was released from the hospital Jan. 1. More recent reports from Hong Kong indicate suspected third and fourth SARS cases in Guangdong Province.

That China publicly announced these four suspected SARS cases in a matter of days stands in sharp contrast to China's stonewalling for months following the initial SARS outbreak in 2002. Beijing's original quarantine on news of SARS endangered not only its own population, but the world, as people as far away as Canada and Vietnam fell prey to the deadly virus. Between November 2002 and July 2003, the number of SARS cases worldwide totaled 8,100, including 774 fatalities, with China alone accounting for 5,300 infections and 349 deaths.

Beijing's forthcoming attitude since late April, when it revealed the true extent of its SARS infections, is to be commended and bodes well for the future – but only if it proves to be a pattern. We can only hope that China's leadership has learned a painful but valuable lesson about the politics of globalization: a major power participating in the global economy cannot simultaneously maintain its secretiveness, its credibility, and its population's health.

The situation has been strongly reminiscent of the Soviet Union's handling of the April 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. The Kremlin did not admit to the largest nuclear accident ever until Sweden, after detecting the fallout, made it clear that concealing the tragedy was impossible. Likewise, as the WHO and the media began tracing SARS back to China's Guangdong Province, continued public relations "damage control" proved to be a lost cause.

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, in power only 13 months at the time of the Chernobyl accident, sought initially to camouflage the extent of the disaster, only to reverse course, coming to the conclusion that candor served his purposes better than continued evasion. On May 14, 1986, he seized the initiative in a televised speech to the nation, arguing

that Chernobyl underscored the necessity for his program of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring).

China's new head of state, Hu Jintao, seems to have concluded, at least in the short run, that China has more to gain from transparency than media containment. News from Beijing back on April 20-21 included: the sacking of the minister of health and the mayor of Beijing for misrepresenting the extent of SARS; recognition that China's SARS cases were 10 times higher than previously reported; and a surprisingly frank government admission that China, at that point, had been unable to contain the spread of SARS infections. Underscoring the new prominence of candor over concealment, President Hu was shown on Chinese television visiting a lab engaged in SARS research.

Then on May 2, Chinese officials revealed that a submarine accident April 16 had cost the lives of 70 Chinese crewmen. Speculation was that the regime's unusual announcement stemmed from fear that the story would soon be revealed in any case. Is it perhaps dawning on Beijing that it is next to impossible in the Internet and cell phone age to conceal its calamities from the world or its own citizens?

A Jan. 13 *BBC News* report juxtaposes the two divergent courses China could take in "handling" news: "Jiang Zemin, who stepped down as China's president last year, but still retains influence, spelled out the old concept of press freedom when he said the mass media must 'accurately and vividly reflect and instill the Party's political standpoint . . . into news stories.'" In contrast, Hu Jintao ordered "regional authorities to allow journalists to report even 'negative' events without undue delay." But what Beijing orders and what old school local authorities carry out may not always be identical. Reportedly, a Guangdong newspaper is currently facing Party strictures for its recent reporting of new SARS cases. The BBC wonders if the Communist Party is reverting to "its old preference for a muzzle and chain."

Gorbachev's *glasnost* gained new purpose and momentum in the wake of Chernobyl, propelling Moscow in the direction of new freedoms and energizing prodemocratic forces. Can we hope for as much for China as it faces a possible reemergence of SARS? That Guangdong health authorities over the last weekend of December refused comment on the TV producer suspected of having SARS, referring callers instead to its provincial Communist Party, suggests how fearful of the whole truth Chinese officials remain. We can only hope China's leadership will follow Gorbachev's example of *glasnost* for real – for the benefit of over 1 billion Chinese, and in turn, the rest of the world.

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