

The New York Times

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May 21, 1989

UPHEAVAL IN CHINA

UPHEAVAL IN CHINA; BIGGEST BEIJING CROWDS SO FAR KEEP TROOPS FROM CITY CENTER; PARTY REPORTED IN BITTER FIGHT

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF, Special to The New York Times

BEIJING, May 20— Huge throngs, possibly amounting to more than one million Chinese, took to the streets today to defy martial law and block troops from reaching the center of the capital, effectively delaying or preventing the planned crackdown on China's democracy movement.

Troops approaching Beijing on at least five major roads were halted or turned back by the largest crowds to have gathered so far in a month of almost continuous protests. Students and ordinary citizens erected roadblocks or lay in the path of army trucks, while others let the air out of their tires.

Reports from around the country indicated growing support for the democracy movement. The city of Xian was reportedly brought to a standstill by 300,000 protesters, and rallies were reported in Shanghai, Canton and at least half a dozen other cities, and even small villages. Mostly Peaceful Confrontations

A few clashes were reported, but the confrontations seemed to be mostly peaceful. More troops were reported to be making their way toward Beijing, however, and it was not clear that the people could continue to keep the soldiers out. So far, the troops have not tried very hard to enter Beijing, and a more concerted effort backed by the use of tear gas would almost certainly succeed. But after a full day of confrontation, questions were increasingly raised about the army's readiness to quell the protests. [The Associated Press, in a report Sunday from Beijing, said soldiers had set up roadblocks to the center of the capital and occupied its train station. The report also said as many as 70,000 troopers may have moved into the city center by subway and followed connecting tunnels to the walled palace, the history museum and the Great Hall of the People on three sides of the vast Tiananmen Square.] Prime Minister Li Peng, who early this morning ordered the military crackdown on the democracy movement, did not make an appearance or comment later today. Television stations repeatedly broadcast his speech calling for the military crackdown.

As the military crackdown seemed increasingly uncertain, there were signs that the Communist Party General Secretary, Zhao Ziyang, still had a chance of recovering his authority and elbowing aside Mr. Li and the senior leader, Deng Xiaoping, to become China's next leader in an intense and increasingly bitter power struggle within the Communist Party.

Communist Party officials with access to information at the highest level say Mr. Deng has stripped Mr. Zhao of his powers while leaving him with his title. In addition, they say a meeting of the Central Military Commission on Thursday effectively stripped him of his right to order troop movements.

Mr. Zhao submitted his resignation on May 17, after being outvoted 4 to 1 on the Standing Committee of the Politburo on his proposals to grant most student demands, the official said. The resignation was withdrawn the next day before it was acted upon. Proposals Get Support

In the meantime, Mr. Zhao's bold proposals - including a plan to disclose the income and assets of officials at the level of Deputy Minister and higher - have subsequently received the support of a second member of the Politburo Standing Committee, Hu Qili. Now an intense effort is said to be under way to lobby the crucial swing vote of a committee member, Qiao Shi, whose support would mean a majority for Mr. Zhao.

Mr. Zhao's future might also come up at a meeting of the full Politburo, which has not yet been scheduled, or at a meeting of the Central Committee, which had been expected at the end of this month. How the Politburo or Central Committee might vote is likely to depend on the success of the crackdown.

"Li Peng is now in charge of the party, so he'll be scheduling the meetings," an official said. "So if he thinks he might lose, he will delay holding a meeting." The harshness of Mr. Li's speech seems to have galvanized much of Beijing's population to support the student democracy movement, and Mr. Li and Mr. Deng are now openly referred to as public enemies.

Protesters in Shanghai today carried banners reading "Li Peng does not represent us" and "Li Peng, do not use the people's army against the people," Reuters reported. In most parts of Beijing, neither the police nor army troops could be seen today, but residents were in an exuberant frenzy to protect themselves from the threat of what is regarded as virtually an enemy invasion. All major intersections have been taken over by local residents who stand guard, waiting impatiently for the troops to arrive so they can implement careful plans to erect barricades and summon help.

"With the people behind us, we'll succeed," said Xu Shiyi, a student from Henan Province who has come to Beijing to support the movement. "No Government can survive by using the army against its own citizens." Not Much Work in Beijing

While proposals in the predawn hours for a general strike seem to have been little heeded, it was clear that even if workers did not call formal strikes, they did not do much work. Beijing residents today had other things to preoccupy them, like how to keep the army out.

As rumors spread about where troops might be arriving, citizens rushed by car, bicycle and foot to do their part to turn the troops back. The crowds were larger than those last Wednesday and Thursday that the official New China News Agency had estimated at more than one million.

Truck drivers drove their vehicles in front of military convoys to block their way, and ordinary citizens lay down on the ground in front of army trucks. Many seemed to remember these tactics from the Philippine military coup that ousted President Ferdinand E. Marcos. Television footage of the "people power" revolution of the Philippines was widely shown in China at the time and now workers delight in saying that people power will defeat Prime Minister Li.

The most serious of the scattered clashes reported today occurred on a road in western Beijing, according to students, who said about 150 police officers used cattle prods to beat about 45 students blocking military trucks. Protests in the Provinces

Anti-Government demonstrations broke out in provincial Chinese cities and even rural towns today, witnesses said.

The ancient capital of Xian in northern China came to a standstill when 300,000 protesters, sympathetic citizens and onlookers packed the city's streets, a Western witness told Reuters.

On Shanghai's waterfront, 20,000 students flanked by thousands of sympathetic city workers protested for the fifth day running in support of 400 hunger strikers who have gone without food outside Government headquarters since Tuesday.

A large contingent of troops have been stationed in the European-style office buildings close to the waterfront but have not yet moved against the protesters, a reporter said.

Shanghai is also the host to a three-ship squadron of the American Seventh Fleet, which arrived for the second United States Navy visit to the port since the 1949 Communist takeover. Demonstrators have erected a 10-foot-high polystyrene replica of the Statue of Liberty in front of the Shanghai city government offices. The American sailors have been instructed to avoid the protests. Waiting in Tiananmen Square

In Beijing, nearly 100,000 people seemed prepared this evening to wait all night in central Tiananmen Square to protect student protesters from attack by troops. Even though there was no evidence of hostile troops within miles, many waited expectantly with clothes over their faces for my butts of tear gas they have been told to expect.

The readiness to help has taken other forms. The Government today cut off the water supply to Tiananmen Square, but as word spread that the water fountains and taps in the area were no longer working, private business people from all over the capital contributed their motorcycles to carry buckets of water to the students.

There are still nearly 3,000 students engaged in a hunger strike on the square to back their demands for a dialogue with Government officials and for a reappraisal of the student movement. #30,000 Troops Deployed After the harshness of Mr. Li's speech, the lack of any strong military follow-through has raised questions about the extent to which the Prime Minister can force his will. About 30,000 troops from Inner Mongolia and Shanxi Province reportedly have been deployed, but they are vastly outnumbered by the more than one million people who took to the streets today.

Some of the troops today could be seen with tear gas canisters, and some reportedly had guns, but they seemed decidedly pacifist. Most of the soldiers seemed unwilling to openly violate their orders to advance on Beijing, but they seemed quite happy to be blocked along the way.

There also were some signs of dissatisfaction from within the party and the Government at the hard line against the students. Officials in the central party organization today circulated among themselves an appeal for a party meeting to discuss the crisis and to consider the possible retirement of Mr. Deng, according to a person who has seen the letter.

The Communist Youth League Central Committee sent a delegation to protest in Tiananmen Square, and the People's Daily newspaper today seemed to offer an implicit endorsement of Mr. Zhao over Mr. Li. The newspaper printed a photo of Mr. Zhao that was not only higher than Mr. Li's on the front page but more

than twice as wide. The accompanying article included excerpts from Mr. Zhao's comments to students, and was calculated to inspire sympathy. Bitter Power Struggle

"Of course it's an endorsement," a senior party official said. "That's as clear as it gets."

The internal power struggle between Mr. Zhao and Mr. Li has taken a much more bitter turn in the last few weeks, partly because of furious disagreements over how to deal with the demonstrating students. But party officials say that perhaps the most important element was that Mr. Zhao took the unprecedented step of challenging his longtime patron, Mr. Deng.

While Mr. Zhao is said to have felt for some time that his patron should retire fully from politics, the conflict began after Mr. Deng reacted very harshly on April 25 to student demonstrators and organized a crackdown that later was aborted. When Mr. Zhao returned from a trip abroad he made a mild speech on how to deal with students. The speech won widespread support but was resented by Mr. Deng because it pursued a much more moderate strategy. Zhao Attack on Deng

Then, as pro-democracy demonstrations grew increasingly large, Mr. Zhao seemed to think that they represented an important constituency that he could use to gain an advantage. According to an account by an official familiar with the struggle, Mr. Zhao made his attacks, in classic Chinese style, by purporting to praise Mr. Deng. In his meeting Wednesday with Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, Mr. Zhao hailed Mr. Deng as an indispensable leader who still must sign off on every important decision.

Without consulting Mr. Deng, Mr. Zhao also disclosed that the Central Committee had formally adopted a resolution saying that Mr. Deng should be consulted on important matters. While the comments were all couched in praise, the effect was to remind people that the 84-year-old Mr. Deng still makes all of China's important decisions.

The next day's demonstration was full of posters denouncing Mr. Deng, but Mr. Deng himself recognized the ploy, officials said. Mr. Li weighed in in the increasingly bitter fight by saying, in a televised meeting, that his sons were not involved in official profiteering - a clear slap at Mr. Zhao, whose two eldest sons are widely regarded as having been suspiciously successful in business.

Then last Thursday Mr. Zhao made an early morning trip to the hunger-strikers in Tiananmen Square and apologized to them for not coming earlier. "Things are very complicated," he said in what was widely taken as a reference to the difficulty of convincing Mr. Deng and Mr. Li of the need for compromise.

That was the last time Mr. Zhao has been seen in public.

Photos of Chinese Army troops shaking hands with demonstrators who blocked roads to prevent them from entering the center of the city in Beijing (Reuters); a soldier talking with demonstrators in southwest Beijing, where Army troops had been stalled, their path blocked by protesters (AP); map of Beijing area indicating Tiananmen Square (NYT) (pg. 16)