

ARCHIVES | 1989

CHINESE PREMIER ISSUES A WARNING TO THE PROTESTERS

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF and SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES MAY 19, 1989

About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems. Please send reports of such problems to archive_feedback@nytimes.com.

BEIJING, Friday, May 19 - Prime Minister Li Peng warned Thursday that chaos in Beijing was spreading all over the country, but his demand for restraint was ignored by up to a million people who braved a driving rain to demonstrate once more for greater democracy.

To defuse the situation, the Government capitulated on a key student demand by arranging a nationally televised meeting between Mr. Li and leaders of the students' pro-democracy movement.

In another gesture of conciliation, Mr. Li and the Communist Party leader, Zhao Ziyang, went to Tiananmen Square in central Beijing before dawn today to visit some of the 3,000 hunger strikers whose protest has galvanized the nation into mass demonstrations of support. 'Things Are Complicated'

"We've come too late," Mr. Zhao told the students, according to the official New China News Agency. "You have good intentions. You want our country to become better. The problems you have raised will eventually be resolved. But things are complicated, and there must be a process to resolve these problems."

Mr. Zhao added that "the whole of Beijing" was discussing the hunger strike, and he called on the students to end the fast.

As the demonstrations continued in the capital, scores of thousands of people took

to the streets of Shanghai on Thursday to demand more democracy and show support for the hunger strikers. The demonstration coincided with a visit to the city by Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, who ended his four-day trip to China after concluding agreements for expanded party and government contacts and a general reduction of military tensions in Asia. [Page A11.] Leadership Is Split The Chinese leadership has been split about how to handle the challenge from the students. Mr. Zhao's comments appeared to be an attempt to win support from demonstrators and to put blame on other leaders for adopting a harder line and thereby complicating the situation.

The meeting today in Tiananmen Square appeared to be much more cordial than the students' televised encounter with Mr. Li on Thursday, in which the Prime Minister refused to discuss issues raised by the students and hinted at a crackdown if the disorder continued.

Student leaders complained about Mr. Li's sometimes harsh tone, and the hunger strikers, who have been fasting since midday Saturday, vowed to continue. They said that the talks with Mr. Li were not a real dialogue, because he did not discuss substantive issues, and that he had not met their demand for a positive official reappraisal of the student movement. Senator Urges Restraint

In Washington, Senator Claiborne Pell, Democrat of Rhode Island and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said Thursday: "I urge the Chinese Government to exercise restraint. Forcible repression would be the worst possible action at a time when the students have won admiration and support in China and throughout the world."

The crowd in Beijing on Thursday was enormous - the Chinese press agency put it at one million - but it appeared to be somewhat smaller than the throng that took over the center of the capital on Wednesday, which had also been widely estimated at a million. Not dwindling enthusiasm but unpleasant weather seemed responsible for the smaller turnout, for many of the workers who marched on Thursday seemed better organized and more aggressive than a day earlier.

There were some formal strikes on Thursday, and work at many other factories and offices seemed to cease completely as workers devoted their energy to writing imaginative banners and marching in the streets around Tiananmen Square.

"Most people didn't do any work today," said a graying, heavily calloused worker of Beijing's No. 2 Chemical Factory. "You can call it a strike, and it will continue until the Government responds to our demands. We're terribly angry,

because the Government won't agree to a meaningful dialogue with the students. What kind of a Government do we have?"

"We're putting pressure on the highest authorities to change their minds," he continued. "And if they won't change their mind, they must resign. Otherwise, the situation will deteriorate."

The televised discussion on Thursday, while almost universally regarded by students as unsatisfactory, would have been unthinkable just a week or two ago. Prime Minister Li, who is usually shown on television suffused in dignity, had scarcely sat down in the Great Hall of the People when a student leader named Wuer Kaixi - a freshman from the northwestern Xinjiang Province - rebuked him for being late.

Mr. Wuer and another student leader, Wang Dan, also called on the Prime Minister to stop evading the issues and begin a serious conversation, and they warned that the Government would bear the responsibility for any disturbances.

"In the last few days, Beijing has fallen into a kind of anarchy," Mr. Li declared angrily. "I hope you will think it over. What will result from the situation? China's Government is responsible to the people. We will not sit idly by, doing nothing. We have to safeguard people's property and our students' lives. We have to safeguard our factories. We have to defend our socialist system."

The sharp exchanges marked perhaps the first time that a Chinese leader has been subjected to the public humiliations that politicians regularly endure in the West.

The demands of the students and workers are somewhat vague, and it is not entirely clear what will satisfy them. Formally, the students are demanding a televised dialogue with national leaders and a reappraisal of the student movement, but some say that would not be enough unless the result was a more open political system.

"A mere dialogue isn't enough now," said a student from the Beijing Materials College. "Maybe that would have been fine a week or so ago, but now we want real changes in the way the Government works."

It is clear from banners and slogans that many people want nothing less than the removal of the country's senior leader, Deng Xiaoping, and Prime Minister Li. Even the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a prestigious Government institution, erected a large banner on the side of its building on Thursday reading, "Dump the Politburo." Railway Traffic Halted

In a sign of the growing unrest, Mr. Li announced in the televised meeting that traffic on one of China's main railway corridors had been halted for three hours in the city of Wuhan, apparently because of a strike. Such actions provoke special worries in China because of the memories of the disruptions and chaos of the Cultural Revolution beginning in 1966.

Another parallel with the Cultural Revolution is the growing number of students from other regions who are flooding into Beijing to take part in the demonstrations. Many are being allowed to ride free on trains, just as Red Guards were allowed to do during the Cultural Revolution.

A Qinghua University student who arrived in Beijing on Thursday from the city of Xian said his train car, with 118 seats, had been jammed with more than 300 people, most of them students coming to Beijing to demand democracy. At every stop, he said, students jammed the railway platforms, and most managed to avoid buying tickets by appealing to the public spirit of train conductors.

The demonstration in the capital on Thursday was noteworthy not only for the numbers of people who braved the rain, but also for the degree of organization. Many workers clearly had the support of their work units, for they carried the official banners of their factories. Several said Communist Party cadres had approved of the protest. Official Groups Represented

The degree of organization did not necessarily indicate some hidden hand encouraging the demonstrators to benefit a faction in China's leadership. The workers all denied that this was the case, and some said their local Communist Party cells had simply become sufficiently independent of the central party organization that they did not worry about disobeying higher officials.

As on Wednesday, the organizations represented in the demonstrations included an array of institutions that are close to the party and the Government. A few units from the army arrived in the square, and so did others from the police and several Government ministries.

A version of this article appears in print on May 19, 1989, on Page A00001 of the National edition with the headline: CHINESE PREMIER ISSUES A WARNING TO THE PROTESTERS.