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CHINA: Beijing Breaks Silence on Racist Attacks in Indonesia

By IPS Correspondents

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BEIJING, Aug 19 1998 (IPS) - After months of polite silence on violence against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, the Chinese government has not only broken its usual reticence to voice its 'grave concern' but allowed small-scale protests as well.

Hundreds of civilians rallied last week and on Indonesia's Independence Day Monday, to demand justice for the killings and systematic rapes of ethnic Chinese at the height of anti-Suharto riots in May.

Public protests are quite remarkable in a country like China, which used troops to suppress the student movement in Tiananmen Square nine years ago.

Since the bloody crackdown on June 4, 1989, Beijing has vigilantly kept the lid on any kind of social demonstrations, fearing they could go out of control and turn against the government.

Yet on two occasions in the last week, people gathered in front of the Indonesian embassy in Beijing to protest the attacks of ethnic Chinese, and authorities let the protests proceed.

This has lead observers to conclude that the government has softened its usual rigid attitude toward small protests.

The tacit approval of the demonstrations also marks an unexpected change of diplomatic attitude by Beijing, which has been leery of being seen as interfering on behalf of the millions of overseas Chinese who are now citizens of other countries.

China's ties with compatriots across Asia have been cause for tension in the past, with overseas Chinese being accused of being traitors to their countries and Beijing suspected of aiding communist insurgencies at the time.

After Suharto came to power in 1965, Beijing sent ships to fetch ethnic Chinese fleeing the mayhem following the aborted coup in Indonesia. China-Indonesia ties have long been cool and diplomatic relations were patched up onlu in 1990.

At the height of riots in Indonesia three months ago, when asked about how Beijing would protect ethnic Chinese there, foreign ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao said China has no hold over them.

"Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia have been naturalised as Indonesian citizens. Many of them have relatives in China. Their relatives are very much concerned. Therefore, the Chinese government hopes the situation in Indonesia can calm down as soon as possible," he had said.

Two months later, Beijing seems to have abandoned its public policy of 'non-interference' in the affairs of other countries.

On Aug 3, the official 'People's Daily', which voices the stance of the Communist Party, ran an editorial calling for full protection of the rights of all Indonesians and demanding a full investigation of the rapes of ethnic Chinese women.

A day later, the 'Beijing Youth Daily', one of the most popular vernacular newspapers in the capital, gave wide coverage to the atrocities committed in Jakarta and other cities during the riots that helped topple the 32-year regime of Suharto.

Revelations by human rights groups that some 150 women, mostly ethnic Chinese, were gang-raped in Jakarta alone in what appeared to be an organised operation, stirred indignation here.

Before the 'Beijing Youth Daily' ran its graphic report, news had begun to filter in through the Internet and foreign media. Protests against anti-Chinese violence have also been held in Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan and the Philippines.

The first letter of appeal that Chinese protesters handed to the Indonesian government last week drew the support of more than 200 signatories, who compared the treatment of Indonesian Chinese to that of the Jews in Nazi Germany.

The letter asked the Indonesian embassy to relay the message of protest to its government, and to submit the letter to the local media for publication. It also asked for permission for Chinese social groups to witness the trial of people who committed the May rapes when and if it starts.

"We will continue protesting until we receive the response of the Indonesian government," said Jiang Qisheng, a veteran student leader who took part in drafting the letter.

Though the Beijing protests are aimed at solidarity with fellow Chinese, they are not without internal meaning and resonance.

What is even more remarkable about them — and perhaps worrisome to officials — is the fact that the protests have united relatives of the victims of the Tiananmen massacre and former participants in the student movement of 1989.

Jiang Qisheng, who was expelled from People's University in the wake of the massacre, is among the protesters against the violence against Indonesian Chinese.

He believes Chinese are speaking out. "I think people who took part in the protest or signed the letter had all something to say," he noted. "Chinese people are becoming more and more aware of their citizens' rights and begin to exercise them."

About one-quarter of the letter's signatories are relatives of victims of the 1989 massacre. Ding Zilin, a professor of aesthetics at the People's University who lost her son in the Tiananmen crackdown, reckons this is their largest organised activity since the bloodshed.

"During all these years, we received immense support from overseas Chinese all over the world," she said. "They helped us with money, donations and supported our cause by all possible means. What we are doing now is give them our love in return."

While their message runs parallel to the government's line, Beijing remains jittery about political activities that could snowball into something else — especially given the fact that the people taking to the streets are students from the same university that started the 1989 political movement.

When last week students from Beijing University applied for a permission, as required by law, to demonstrate on Indonesia's Independence Day, the police rejected their request on grounds of concerns over threats to public security and social order.

University officials also tried to stop students from going to the Indonesian embassy on Monday, saying Chinese youth should not be creating instability at a time when large parts of the country are threatened by devastating floods.

But the students stuck with their plans, though instead of a demonstration they held a sit-in in front of the embassy Monday.

"Some 100 people took part," said a spokesman for the university's student association. "We delivered a petition signed by more than 1,400 students. The first secretary of the embassy came out to receive it."

"The government shouldn't prevent students from organising these kinds of protests," commented Ding. "If they do, it means they are worried."