



Photos by Reuters

Soldiers search for survivors in Fanglin after explosion. Most victims were third- and fourth-graders.

## Forced Child Labor Turns Deadly in China's Needy School System

■ **Asia:** Students were assembling firecrackers when a blast killed at least 42 people. Money allegedly went to education officials.

By CHING-CHING NI  
and HENRY CHU  
TIMES STAFF WRITERS

SHANGHAI—Ten-year-old Zhang Yanhong knew that if she refused to make firecrackers at school she could be forced to pay a fine. Or kneel on the classroom floor. So the girl obeyed her teacher—and lost her life.

As Americans grapple once again with the horrors of campus violence this week, Chinese parents are facing a different kind of tragedy in their schools. Chronic education underfunding and poor enforcement of child labor laws have combined to create a cottage industry in the country's classrooms, culminating in a deadly explosion Tuesday that killed at least 42 people, most of them third- and fourth-graders.



A mother holds her injured daughter. The government said madman was to blame for blast.

The government blamed it on a lone madman. But relatives of the children who died in Fanglin village, a remote hamlet about 480 miles southwest of Shanghai, beg to differ.

For nearly three years, they have complained, to no avail, about school officials forcing their children to assemble firecrackers during and after school.

The area, in Jiangxi province, is famous for producing the recreational explosives popular during national holidays. Parents say the students worked in shifts inserting tiny detonators, the final step in the process.

On the day of the blast, it was the third- and fourth-graders' turn to do the work, apparently to fill an order for the Qingming, or Grave Sweeping Festival, next month.

"These younger kids each had to produce about 1,000 pieces a day, and the older kids, the fifth-graders, had to make 10 times that many," said Li Yufan, a villager whose 11-year-old nephew died in the blast.

The money, residents said, went into school officials' pockets, including teachers who may have gone unpaid for a long time and who willingly put their young charges to work in addition to teaching them. The parents, already hit by heavy school fees, say they had no choice but to look the other way if they wanted their kids to receive some kind of education.

Please see CHINA, A6

# CHINA: School Task Turns Deadly

Continued from A1

Those twin problems—cash-strapped schools and the easy availability of child labor—have spiraled in recent years, often feeding each other in a cycle that has child-welfare advocates worried about the future of millions of Chinese youths, especially those in the countryside.

As rural living standards lag significantly behind those in the cities, more and more parents are pulling their children out of school and putting them to work. Figures are hard to pin down, but estimates put the number of underage laborers—15 or younger, according to Chinese law—in the millions.

At the same time, local authorities have struggled to meet their educational obligations since the early 1990s, when Beijing devolved most of the responsibility for funding schools to counties. Today much of Beijing's education budget goes toward urban colleges and universities rather than primary and secondary schools in the countryside.

"The funding gap between the city and the countryside is huge," said Zhou Yuxian, an education expert at Beijing Normal University.

In some rural areas, the average [annual] spending per child is less than a dollar."

Even so, in poor counties, education can take up half the county's budget, mostly in the form of teacher salaries.

As a result, schools across the country have resorted to a popular woe: going into business.



In a turn that many Westerners find surprising, the vast majority of Chinese public schools are engaged not just in education but also enterprise, running everything from taxi fleets to computer stores to make some extra money—not all of which makes it to the classroom.

Last year, the New China News Agency reported that 91%—or about 620,000—of China's second-

ary schools have set up cottage industries of some kind. Those businesses raked in \$15 billion in 1999, nearly equal to the central government's entire education budget.

Education officials like to say that the enterprises reinforce the link between education and the economy. In the case of China's vocational and technical schools, which serve millions of young people, the linkage can make sense, a real-world application of the skills they're learning. In other cases, the ventures are purely mercenary.

Not all, or even most, of the businesses employ students; some are relatively harmless, like the on-campus grocery store at the China Commerce High School in suburban Beijing.

But school officials in Fanglin apparently seized on the opportunity to use their pupils—some barely old enough to read—in converting classrooms into workshops.

"I don't know who originally thought up the scheme, but there are a lot of people in this area who are in the firecracker business," said Zhang Xingen, Yanhong's father. "These people have good relations with the teachers at the school, which is why they entrusted firecracker [production] to the teachers.

"The teachers made the students do the work and collected a commission for themselves," Zhang said bitterly.

Residents in Fanglin said the village's Communist Party secretary and principal also received kickbacks that supplemented both the school's and their own meager purses. The children received nothing.

"I send my children to school to receive an education. Who thought it would be for them to make firecrackers?" said Zhang, 32. "We tried to protest to the county government, but the township officials blocked us. Once they see that you're just villagers and that you've come to complain, they pay you no heed."

The forced labor of their children was especially galling because parents already had to fork over considerable sums of money for various school fees—some of marginal, if any, educational value.

The overcharging of arbitrary campus fees has become a source of constant complaint nationwide and a practice for which the Beijing regime and state-run media often rebuke schools—but do little to curb.

Parents, who scoff at the government's pledge of free public educa-

tion up to Grade 9, are often expected to pay not just for books, but also for their school's electricity, paper, snacks—whether the child eats them or not—and even report cards.

This has added to China's dropout rate, especially among high school students.

"It can be a very severe barrier for very poor families," said Mark Hereward, who works for the U.N. Children's Fund in Beijing. "Normally, when you find a child who's not in school and you ask the parents why, they'll say they can't afford it."

The youngsters pound the pavements instead.

"They're 12 to 16 years old and they have nothing to do in the rural areas, and the parents take care of their farm," said Parry Leung of the Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee, which tracks labor issues in China. "So they go out to look for work."

Last summer, Leung's group discovered more than 150 youths toiling in a Chinese factory just across the border from Hong Kong, packaging toys to go with McDonald's meals. Many of the youngsters had stopped attending school after finishing primary grades, their parents too poor to keep on paying.

In Fanglin, Zhang handed over about \$30 for a year of schooling for his daughter. That's a hefty burden in an area where annual incomes hover around \$400. About \$2 of the fees supposedly went toward the purchase of a tea-based oil for cooking, which was ridiculous, Zhang said, because the oil isn't even sold in the area anymore. But he had no choice but to cough up if he wanted his daughter to receive any kind of education.

After Tuesday's disaster, thousands of villagers gathered outside the school to demand justice. Local officials, evidently afraid that things might spin out of control, sealed off roads leading to the village and arrested locals who helped Chinese reporters get through. Villagers said that some of the victims' home telephones had been disconnected to prevent parents from talking to journalists.

This is no time for a black eye as Beijing puts on its best face for the annual meeting of the National People's Congress. Premier Zhu Rongji on Thursday denied that the students were making firecrackers and said that a suicide bomber with mental problems was responsible.