

A TALE OF TWO CRISES: SARS VS AIDS

BY HU JIA

In this report, sent to HRIC and posted on a number of Chinese Web sites, Beijing Aizhixing Institute director Hu Jia provides a glimpse into the efforts and frustrations of a domestic NGO dedicated to addressing China's AIDS tragedy, and to keeping the outside world informed of the true situation.

On May 15, the date of the International AIDS Candlelight Memorial, China's Vice Premier and Minister of Health, Wu Yi, met with World Health Organization Director-General Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland in Geneva to outline the Chinese government's efforts in controlling the SARS epidemic. On that same day, a team of WHO experts observed SARS prevention measures in AIDS-stricken villages in Henan Province's Shangcai County. Tonight by the light of a candle I record how local officials made every effort to ensure that the truth was concealed from the visiting WHO experts.

Beginning on May 15 a number of residents of Shangcai County's AIDS-affected villages contacted me and reported unusual activities suggesting the imminent arrival of a VIP delegation. On May 16 news circulated from the local health department that a delegation from WHO and China's Ministry of Health would be visiting Shangcai County to observe what measures were being taken to prevent the spread of SARS. Over the previous two months Chinese officials had hindered WHO efforts by providing falsified information. Now, in order to prevent more such deception, WHO officials had adopted the strategy of surprise inspections; they had obtained permission from the central government to visit Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong and other affected areas, providing no more than 5 minutes notice at any location so that local officials would not be given the opportunity to cover up the actual circumstances. For this trip to Henan the central government had instructed local officials to provide the WHO team with unimpeded access to any areas they wished to examine. But what this order actually did was to give local officials implied permission and opportunity to prepare for the WHO team.



Hu Jia tries to comfort Chen Yue, an AIDS-stricken mother.
Photo courtesy of Open Magazine.

During the day on May 17 portions of Shangcai County were placed under curfew while local officials had village doctors set up SARS inspection points at various traffic intersections, in order to demonstrate the extensive efforts being made to prevent SARS from entering the area. All through the night of May 17 the Party Secretary of Shangcai County personally accompanied local officials in delivering AIDS medications to affected households in Wenlou Village. This was the most significant measure taken on behalf of the residents of Wenlou Village to date. Regardless of whether the medication was appropriate for individual patients, it was duly distributed, with officials instructing the villagers to stay well away from the official delegation due to arrive the next day.

On the morning of May 18 more than 200 plainclothes law enforcement officers from neighboring localities surrounded

Wenlou Village, and along with a posse of county and village officials prevented any contact between villagers and the visiting WHO delegation. The “villagers” that the WHO team was allowed to see were in fact the very plainclothes police officers who were preventing actual villagers from having an opportunity to speak to the visiting officials.

On that morning, when a few villagers went to the village clinic to pick up some medication, law enforcement officers required two AIDS-infected women to leave immediately under threat of arrest. Half an hour before the arrival of the WHO delegation, two more villagers came out to talk with the visitors (the villagers didn’t know who was in the delegation, only that senior officials would be present), but county officials had them arrested immediately and taken away to the Public Security Bureau, where they were detained from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. Witnesses say these actions were carried out under the orders of County Secretary Yang Songquan, who threatened to fire any local official who failed to seal off the village.

Villagers denied access to the clinic spotted more than a dozen vehicles entering the village, but knew nothing more than that some senior officials had come to inspect SARS prevention measures. Local officials confined AIDS patients to their homes and did not let them move about, and every street and lane was guarded. Some villagers were able to observe the proceedings from their homes, but only at a distance of at least 100 yards, and public security officers closely monitored their every movement. We were in telephone communication with some villagers at the time, and it was like listening to a live broadcast of an event on the radio. But for the whole time, right up until the WHO inspection team left the village at 11:20, the villagers could say little about the delegation except that it included foreigners, and no one was able to approach the group closely enough to talk with them.

On June 26 we interviewed one of the people detained, a 40-year-old woman named Yang Nidan, to hear her version of events. Yang is already suffering from the symptoms of AIDS, and at the time of her arrest had just come back from an examination at the county hospital. With considerable emotion she described how on the morning of May 18 she had gone to the village clinic to obtain medication. The clinic was chronically short of medicine, and when Yang heard of the visiting VIP delegation she decided to wait near the clinic to tell them about the situation. When low-level officials failed to deter her, the county party secretary ordered four police officers to grab her by the arms and legs. They loaded her roughly into a police vehicle, after which she was detained at the police station until 4 p.m. Yang was not willing to leave the police station immediately, but demanded to be told on what basis she had been detained. She said a police officer told her, “You want to know what law you broke? I’ll kick you to death and then you’ll know!” Four police officers then loaded her back into the police vehicle and escorted her back home.

We would really like to know what law this woman broke. According to Article 37 of China’s Constitution, “The freedom of person of citizens of the People’s Republic of China is inviolable. No citizen may be arrested except with the approval or by decision of a people’s procuratorate or by deci-

sion of a people’s court, and arrests must be made by a public security organ. Unlawful deprivation or restriction of citizens’ freedom of person by detention or other means is prohibited; and unlawful search of the person of citizens is prohibited.” Article 38 states, “The personal dignity of citizens of the People’s Republic of China is inviolable. Insult, libel, false charge or frame-up directed against citizens by any means is prohibited.” And according to Article 5, “No organization or individual may enjoy the privilege of being above the Constitution and the law.”

At the time of the interview, Yang Nidan was still suffering from bruised elbows and an injured back. Yang is an average farmwife who does not stand out in any way among her neighbors in Wenlou Village, and she is not an activist. Her father-in-law, now in his seventies, is an old Party member who participated in the revolution. The family is poor and their home run down, but they have never asked their government for anything, and the old man borrows money if necessary to pay his Party dues. When he learned of Yang Nidan’s arrest, the old man, who seldom leaves his bed, made his way on crutches to the police station to reason with the police, but they would not let him in. The old man remarked bitterly, “The Party is no longer what it was.” Yang’s husband has never mustered the courage to have an HIV test, but he is constantly ill with symptoms of AIDS. He said that if he could obtain legal aid he would sue the county party secretary. The couple has two sons and a daughter. The daughter, age 15, has already gone out to work. The Yangs’ situation is a very common one in Henan’s AIDS villages, and Yang Nidan wishes no more than to voice the concerns of others like her. More recently Yang has tried to talk to county officials, but without success.

A few more examples show some of the special features of SARS prevention efforts in Shangcai and other AIDS-affected parts of Henan province.

Fake Quarantines

During the weeks immediately following the outbreak of SARS in China’s northeast, more than 50 workers left Shandong, Beijing, Guangdong and other affected provinces to return to their homes in Shangcai County’s Shilipu Village. None of them were put under any form of quarantine. As late as May 15, just before the WHO visit, workers were returning directly to their homes from SARS-infected Shanxi, and many circulated freely throughout the village, much to the horror of other villagers. Village officials in Shangcai County were all well aware of the serious SARS situation in Shanxi, Beijing and other places, and knew that returnees should be quarantined for 12 days, but they were unwilling to strictly enforce these measures. The powerless villagers, especially those already weakened from the symptoms of AIDS, could only pass each day in fear of a local outbreak.

A quarantine tent on the road north of Shilipu Village was overseen by a village official from 8 a.m. until 6 p.m. This official also manned two examination stations north and south of the village, but no one picked up the work when he was off duty. At the end of April a few returning villagers were obliged to stay in the quarantine tent for three to five days, but only

during the day time – at night they went home to sleep, hardly an effective quarantine. A few people were staying in the quarantine tent when provincial and city officials came to inspect it on May 16, but they all returned home that same afternoon. When the big inspection team arrived, someone made a great show of sterilizing the roadside by spraying it with alcohol and then setting it alight. Once the inspection left, the sterilization work ended. It appears that this was the only time any such activity was carried out, and it was all a performance for the provincial inspection team, which only stayed in the village for about half an hour. Some of the villagers at Shilipu remarked in disgust, “Those Communist Party officials aren’t good for much, but at least they put on a good show.” When I asked them if they thought similar performances were being carried out in other villages, the villagers replied, “All crows are black!”

Indeed, it seems that similar activities were carried out in the neighboring Houyang and Wenlou villages. More than 100 people returned to Houyang Village from SARS-infected areas, most of them interior construction workers in Shanxi. Wenlou Village also had a steady stream of at least 50 returnees from Shanxi, Guangdong and Beijing. Each returning villager had his or her temperature taken when entering the village, and then was allowed to return home without any quarantine or other follow-up precautions. In the opinion of many villagers, the examination stations were not so much for passing a health check as they were for passing an inspection by higher officials. Some HIV/AIDS patients observed that during the height of the SARS crisis many doctors and nurses at local hospitals were still not bothering to wear masks.

At present it appears that the SARS crisis has faded out. Experts on communicable diseases have noted that respiratory diseases such as SARS tend to die out naturally during the hot summer months. One of the great mercies in the SARS disaster was that there were no major outbreaks in China’s villages. In Beijing, Guangdong and Hong Kong, where medical services are at their best, the disease still hit medical workers hardest. With far inferior medical facilities and manpower, the hinterlands would have been devastated by a major outbreak. Shanxi, which has an equivalent economic standard to Henan’s, was seriously affected by SARS. We can only thank the hard efforts of other provinces for the lack of an outbreak in Henan. Along with certain preventative measures taken locally, the other factor we must thank is dumb luck.

The Cover-Up

Earlier this year there was an inspection of Shangcai County by provincial and national health officials, for which local officials prepared by repairing every pothole in the local roadways, and by paying each AIDS patient 200 yuan in hush money. The incorporated village of Houyang comprises five natural villages and 17 administrative villages with a total population of 3,864. In the mid-1990s more than 1,800 villagers took part in the government-sponsored blood selling program. This was 95 percent of the village’s most vigorous populace aged 16 to 55. Of these, 450 villagers tested positive for HIV at the Shangcai County Epidemic Prevention station. But in fact, taking into account results at other HIV testing centers

in Wuhan, Zhengzhou, Beijing and elsewhere, a total of 670 villagers were eventually found to be HIV positive. A good 65 percent of the villagers who sold blood never took the HIV blood test because of financial or psychological pressures. Quite a few people went for blood tests only after they developed symptoms of AIDS. Only in portions of Houyang is the number of HIV positive test results reasonably close to the actual number of infected people. Deaths in the village officially attributed to AIDS between 1998 and the present total 260, but this number does not include the deaths of some people who, hoping to avoid discrimination against themselves and their families, never took blood tests or admitted having the disease.

At the time that news began spreading of Henan villagers contracting AIDS from selling blood, more than 1,400 of the 3,170 residents of Wenlou Village in Lugang Township had sold blood. Only 550 people (around 40 percent) of those who sold blood subsequently had their blood tested for HIV. More than 80 other localities in Shangcai County present similar statistics.

In fact, Wenlou Village was by no means the worst affected. A better example is Lugang Township’s Chenglao Village. At the beginning of 2000 it was estimated that 188 of Chenglao’s 308 villagers had sold blood in the mid-1990s. This figure included women who had come to or left the village through marriage. Only 14 people who were tested were found to be free of HIV, and as many as 93 percent of those who participated in the blood selling program later tested positive for HIV, not to mention children subsequently born with AIDS to infected mothers. Between 2000 and 2003, 30 villagers died from AIDS-related illness. Of these, 5 died in 2000 and 16 in 2002, showing an alarming increase over time. The number of deaths is expected to reach its peak in the next three years. Seven children below the age of 18 and 5 children over 18 have been deprived of both parents through AIDS-related deaths. Thirteen more children have lost their fathers to AIDS, and eleven their mothers. As at least one parent from every household in this village sold blood, and in most cases both parents have tested positive for HIV, the future number of AIDS orphans is hard to estimate.

Let’s look at how the local government took care of these sick villagers. None of the taxes villagers have to pay have ever been reduced, and if any family fails to pay the taxes in full, they lose the 100 yuan per month allowance paid to each infected person. Only when all the taxes are paid up is the AIDS allowance reinstated. The AIDS allowance is not provided in cash, but is only exchangeable for medication, and as it is not enough to cover the full cost, AIDS patients are obliged to make up the difference with what little money they have. Children who have lost both parents to AIDS are allowed to attend school free of charge, but others still have to come up with all of the necessary fees for school and books.

Henan provincial and health officials were well aware that the visiting WHO team would be examining the province’s handling of both AIDS and SARS. The party secretary of Henan Province, Li Keqiang, is said to have at one point telephoned central authorities and asked them not to let the WHO experts visit Henan. But by then the Chinese government had already

committed itself and could not withdraw its permission, so Henan had no choice but to accept a joint inspection by the WHO and the Ministry of Health.

The tendency in Henan Province has been to not provide accurate statistics on AIDS. Officials in charge of Shangcai County's epidemic control are not going to suggest there is no incidence of disease – otherwise they have no work. But one official instructed health workers in Houyang to report only 450 cases rather than the actual 670. Likewise Wenlou Village was told to report 306 cases rather than the local estimates of more than 700. Adding in those who did not have their blood tested, the officially reported figures fall short by at least 1,000 cases. We already know that as early as April 20 the Ministry of Health announced in a press conference that the central government would not tolerate any further inaccuracies in figures relating to SARS, but similar strictures do not seem to have been applied to figures relating to AIDS.

On June 18 patients were rushed out of the clinic in Wenlou Village, leaving only a handful of carefully selected, docile individuals to be presented to the WHO delegation. In addition, all of the medical personnel had been sent to a training course to ensure that they could faithfully regurgitate facts, policies and figures relating to AIDS and SARS.

After the WHO inspection team left, several Wenlou villagers sought out the township leader, Yue Qiaohe, who had accompanied the inspection team. When the villagers commented on the overblown performance, Yue laughed bitterly and said, "You all know how it is. There's no way around it." But even Yue felt the arrangements were unconvincingly contrived. She also worried about the consequences of a slip she herself had made by stating that there were more than 600 AIDS patients in Wenlou, when she had been instructed to say 300.

Given the emotional responses of many villagers, I decided to seek out a more objective observer, and found a long-time Party member, 60 years old and not infected with HIV/AIDS. Although he had no personal stake in the situation, this man still noticed some serious problems.

"We had no idea who these people were," this man said. "All of Wenlou Village was put under curfew, with all of Shangcai County's law enforcement officers on hand to impose it. No patients or doctors were allowed to go to the clinic, and we were not allowed to speak. Jiang Zemin's Three Represents policy calls for officials to trust the masses and seek truth from facts. But now they still don't let the masses speak – if you try to say a word they beat you up."

I told the old Party member that the visiting delegation had included WHO experts, and asked if any of the villagers had seen their faces. The man replied, "No villagers came forward to speak. If anyone asked where all of the sick people were, I don't know how they answered. That WHO delegation came here to look around, but if not for AIDS, who would come to Wenlou Village? Henan's provincial party secretary, Li Kejiang, has come here before, but one time he didn't even step out of his car, and another time he stopped for about five minutes and then left. He didn't spend any time with the villagers or listen to their views."

This Party member added, "Actually, I think the central government's policies are good, but anyone who tries to follow them honestly at the lower levels is persecuted. There is no way for officials in Beijing to know what the actual circumstances are down here, because local officials say that everything is fine. In Wenlou Village last year they gave only 58 yuan to each AIDS patient for the whole year. The government announced that it donated more than 5 million yuan to AIDS patients, and that schooling for children and medicines were all provided free of charge. That's complete rubbish."

It cannot be denied that Henan province actually took unprecedented measures to prevent SARS, having been warned that if the disease spread to AIDS-affected villages, official heads would roll. Medical personnel who came across anyone with a fever or other symptoms of SARS immediately treated the case as a possible communicable disease. But it is equally clear that in the eyes of many officials, especially in Shilipu Village and Wenlou Village, the main defenses needed to be erected against the people and the WHO inspection team rather than against SARS. If as much effort had been directed against the corona virus, villagers would have felt much less worried about the disease.

Discriminatory Treatment

At the end of April, Shangcai County spent 500,000 yuan on respirators and other equipment for the treatment of SARS, even though it is uncertain that anyone knows how to operate the equipment. Given the long-term inadequacy of resources available to treat AIDS, such a large national subsidy for an impoverished county to deal with a single disease is unprecedented. Local officials look first to their own survival. If not for the urgings of the central government, it would have been difficult for local governments to move so quickly in a concerted nation-wide effort. Is there any hope of similar attention being devoted to AIDS?

A few weeks ago a worker infected with AIDS returned to his home village from Shanxi. When he was found to be feverish, local officials were alerted and immediately had the man picked up for a thorough physical examination. When it was found that he was suffering from AIDS rather than SARS, the man was immediately released without further treatment. Are only SARS patients considered deserving of medical treatment? Two more Houyang residents returned to the village with fevers, but were sent home once it was learned they were registered as HIV positive, given that fever is a common symptom of HIV/AIDS.

On May 24 a 28-year-old worker with HIV collapsed upon his return from Shanxi. The man suffered from diarrhea and a high fever and had difficulty breathing. It is amazing that someone with those symptoms was not stopped at one of the examination stations somewhere along his journey home. This young man, the only son of his parents, died of complications of AIDS the morning after his return.

There have been more than a few cases in recent years in which AIDS sufferers have died in detention centers, in transit or within a day of returning home.

There has never been a public health policy developed to provide impoverished AIDS patients with the kind of cost-free care given to SARS patients.

AIDS patients in Henan's Sui County have gone two months without their monthly medical stipend, and the stock of medication in the local clinic has run out. The government's explanation is that resources had to be diverted to SARS, and Sui County AIDS patients have been left to battle the disease on their own. Two representatives of local AIDS patients went to the county seat to explain to officials the difficulties AIDS patients are experiencing, but they were barred from entering the county council building by more than 10 security officers enforcing SARS prevention measures. All they could do was keep returning day after day in hopes of being granted an audience with an appropriate official.

Long-Term Planning

Another issue that has arisen among Shangcai County's AIDS patients is whether the results of villagers' HIV blood tests have any legal effect. If there is a positive HIV reading from a blood test in Henan's Zhengzhou Disease Prevention Center, this is stated explicitly on the test results. But the blood test certificate from the Shangcai County Disease Prevention Center only states that the patient needs to take adequate nutrition and rest, accompanied by the center's official seal.

Some villagers compare their situation with the Nanking Massacre, and feel that it is important for them to have solid evidence so officials cannot evade responsibility.

There is no explicit acknowledgement that the patient is HIV positive. Some AIDS patients suspect this is to limit legal liability in case they decide to sue the government blood drive centers. Many AIDS patients have already died, but because of the lack of information on their certificates it is hard to have their deaths officially attributed to AIDS. I have personally confirmed that several HIV-positive villagers carry certificates that advise them to improve nutrition and rest, but state nothing about HIV. Some villagers hope to go to Zhengzhou to have their blood tested, but lack financial resources for the trip. Others compare their situation with the Nanking Massacre, and feel that it is important for them to have solid evidence so officials cannot evade responsibility.

Every major blood testing drive in Shangcai County discovers another batch of HIV positive villagers, causing a statistical headache for government officials. Recently some villagers who previously tested positive for HIV have been told they are HIV negative. This has led some villagers to believe that test results are being falsified in order to reduce the number of officially recognized cases. That has made villagers feel it is even more important to have their blood tested in Zhengzhou before going for another test in Shangcai County. If many of these cases are found, then there will be evidence of the Shangcai County government's attempts to evade responsibility.

Every year the Chinese government attacks the "China Human Rights Report" published by western governments, and emphasizes that the most important human rights are survival and development. But in fact these two civil rights are routinely denied to impoverished villagers, who live and die without ever knowing that they could even hope for such rights.

Related Incidents

Let us continue by looking at some related incidents. In early March the central government began considering the problem of AIDS orphans. The Beijing Aizhixing Institute submitted a report to the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which caused considerable nervousness in the Henan provincial government. The Henan authorities sent the vice-director of the Henan Health Department's Epidemic Prevention Center, Wang Zhe, who had met us before, to meet me along with the new vice-director of the provincial Center for Disease Control. The Henan government was very worried that our work would harm the province's image. Their meaning was plain: they did not want us revealing the Henan provincial government's flaws, but wished for us to communicate with provincial health officials first and give them an opportunity to solve the problem. Because Wang Zhe has spent a lot of time in the field, and has always been relatively frank, I was inclined to accept their suggestion of going to them first and seeing if they could handle the problems locally.

On March 5 the National People's Congress began their meeting. We were expecting a petition signed by people with HIV/AIDS from Shangcai County's Shilipu Village calling for free schooling for their children. One of the villagers, after collecting the signatures, had taken the petition to the Shangcai County post office to send it by express mail to our office in Beijing. While at the post office the villager ran into the head of Shangcai County's AIDS Prevention Office, Feng Shipeng. Feng asked the villager what he was doing, then warned him not to cause any trouble around the time of the two meetings in Beijing or there would be serious consequences. The villager was speechless with anger. As it turned out, we never received the petition from the Shangcai post office.

On April 16 an elderly resident of Shangcai County's Shilipu Village brought his daughter, Chen Yue, and her four-year-old daughter to Beijing to petition the central authorities. The mother and daughter had both been infected with AIDS, and Chen Yue's husband had recently died of complications from AIDS. A Party official responsible for distributing the monthly stipend to villagers infected with HIV/AIDS had brutally beaten Chen Yue. Chen Yue had reported the assault to the Public Security Bureau, but the police were familiar with the Party official, and in the end Chen Yue received only 1,500 yuan in compensation, including the stipend money that was due to her. Chen Yue suspected corruption and decided to take the case to Beijing.

The family came to our office for help and brought along a photographer who was recording their journey. But as a local civil society organization we were unable to offer much substantive assistance. I decided to refer the case to Wang Zhe, and

Wang was of the opinion that as a local matter it could only be settled locally. He asked Aizhixing to provide the family with financial assistance to return home. At that time Beijing's municipal government was still covering up the extent of the SARS crisis, but because our group regularly deals with communicable diseases, we were by that time well aware of how serious the problem had become, and I was one of the few people already wearing a face mask. We were very worried that the family, already weakened by illness, age and travel, might easily contract SARS while trying to deliver their petition. Even worse, they might unknowingly contract the illness and carry it back to their home village, where SARS might have a devastating effect among those already suffering immune deficiency from AIDS. Some mainland doctors have noted that the rate of infection by SARS among people with AIDS is actually very low, but given that much remains unknown about both diseases, we feel it is inevitable that infection with SARS will ultimately speed the demise of people with AIDS.

For that reason we agreed with Wang Zhe's advice to assist the family in returning to Shangcai County as soon as possible. But Chen Yue was unwilling to leave the Aizhixing office, even though it was already 8:30 p.m. Instead she knelt pleading at my feet. The family had no confidence in local officials to solve their problem. My colleague and I tried to impress on the family the danger of SARS. But people who come from the hell of AIDS have already seen so much death and pain that they no longer regard death as a serious threat. Finally at 9 p.m. I myself had to leave, so I led them out of our office to the garden of a nearby temple. Chen Yue continued to bow at my feet, in spite of my protests. Her elderly father sat under a tree, smoking and occasionally sighing and wiping away a tear. The small girl watched her mother's travails in silence. She was a sweet, bright-eyed child, and the whole time she never spoke a word.

I gave them all the money I had with me, except for three yuan that I needed to take the bus home. There was nothing else I could give them but my own facemask and my best wishes for their safe journey.

A few days later I inquired about Chen Yue among other villagers of Shilipu. I learned that we had dashed all of her remaining hopes. I was very sorry, but there was nothing else we could have done. After repeated disappointments, in the end there may be nothing left for them to seek but death. But one thing I do not regret was that my warnings to them about SARS were genuine, and not a means of deceiving them into leaving.

On April 20 it happened that Wang Zhe was in Shangcai County, and I notified the villagers of Shilipu that they should approach him for assistance in solving the problem of school fees for AIDS families. Wang Zhe passed the matter on to Nie Yong, the county vice-chairman responsible for AIDS. Nie Yong told the villagers that the school fee situation would take some time to resolve. Nie said, "When you sold blood back then you were paid for it." A villager said, "If not for the urging of local officials, we wouldn't have sold our blood and contracted AIDS." Possibly Nie felt he had lost face in the presence of local reporters and health workers. Later he privately arranged for that villager to be arrested and taught a

lesson, and terrified the villager and his family. We would like to know what law that villager broke.

On May 16 at 10:00 a.m. the provincial government sent an advance SARS inspection team to Shilipu Village, and the Shangcai County leadership arranged for a welcoming party composed of the village party secretary, township head and township party secretary. Each examination station and clinic put on its own show. Everything went smoothly.

On May 19 SARS was one of the leading topics at the 56th executive committee meeting of the WHO in Vienna. On May 20 the team of WHO experts held a press conference in Zhengzhou and proclaimed Henan's efforts against SARS effective. How much did the experts know about the even greater efforts that had gone on behind the scenes in connection with their visit?

Some Strange Opinions

Last Christmas we brought some clothes donated by Beijing residents to help the AIDS orphans of Shangcai County pass the winter. During this time we experienced some ideological conflicts with local officials. We had heard several rather peculiar conclusions that had been drawn regarding AIDS. According to a county secretariat official responsible for national security, for example, AIDS patients were not people, but demons. One can only wonder how an official can serve the people effectively with such an attitude. But having seen the conditions that some AIDS patients live in, I had to concede that in fact they were effectively living in a different world from the rest of us. I said to that official, "If what you mean is that people infected with AIDS live in a hell on earth, then perhaps they are not far from demons."

On May 16 the provincial government sent an advance SARS inspection team to Shilipu Village. Each examination station and clinic put on its own show. Everything went smoothly.

Another interesting opinion was voiced by the head of Shangcai County's AIDS Prevention Office, Feng Shipeng: the situation of the AIDS epidemic is a state secret. Quite apart from the fact that the laws relating to communicable diseases make it very clear that AIDS is not a state secret, simply from the aspect of the people's right to know, this assertion can only make one's blood boil with anger.

The SARS epidemic started out as a secret kept by the Ministry of Health and the Beijing municipal government, with the result that Beijing soon became one of the places most seriously affected by SARS. On April 20 the Ministry of Health announced that the number of cases of SARS in Beijing had leapt from 37 to 339. People were horrified, and began stockpiling goods or fleeing the city in droves. The fact is that it was not the epidemic that caused social chaos, but rather the government itself, which had lost the people's trust because of its deception and which had failed to give people and medical facilities adequate opportunity to prepare a

defense against the disease. This lost opportunity resulted in the greatest and most visible price Beijing has had to pay for an error in public health. But in fact, AIDS is yet another invisible killer, and serves as an even better example of the disastrous consequences of secrecy. With China facing a cost of AIDS 10 or 100 times greater than that of SARS, who will take the responsibility for this fatal error?

Another conclusion reached by Feng Shipeng was that news of the illness would cause anti-China sentiment and damage China's image abroad. It is true that the highly contagious nature of SARS led to calls overseas for a quarantine on China. But we need to recognize that because of the limitations placed on news issued by the national health system and the Guangdong provincial government, the international spread of SARS put unprecedented pressure on the public health facilities of the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan and added extra frost to an already chilly world economy. I cannot understand why China gives the world so many pretexts on political, human rights, environmental, religious and now public health grounds, to corner and isolate it. As a Chinese citizen I feel that I and the entire country have lost face. On the other hand, can we say these are only pretexts, rather than good reasons? The fact is that the people driven to cries of ultimate despair are China's own citizens, those most oppressed of all people.

According to Article 27 of China's Constitution, "All state organs and functionaries must rely on the support of the people, keep in close touch with them, heed their opinions and suggestions, accept their supervision and work hard to serve them." And Article 41 states, "Citizens of the People's Republic of China have the right to criticize and make suggestions to any state organ or functionary."

Government officials, you must face the fact that your fiercest critics are your own citizens, who are most hurt by your actions. Because local media are too tightly controlled to provide all of the necessary information, the overseas media have been extremely helpful to us on many occasions. For example, Dr. Jiang Yanyong's interviews with CCTV and Phoenix Satellite Television exposing the extent of the SARS crisis were like dropping a stone into the sea. It was only after Time Magazine on April 8 alerted the whole world to the actual situation in Beijing that the government began mobilizing the public. Should this be considered anti-China? I believe the people who hurt China the most are those cruel local officials who treat the people like so much grass.

Numbers Games

Let's look again at some figures. In August 2002 the Henan Province Health Department passed a secret report to the provincial government. The report states that 23,100-33,500 people have become infected with AIDS in Henan Province as a result of selling blood. In August 2002 the Shangcai County government said that 48,000 people had sold blood in 22 villages, and estimated the number of infected persons at 14,000. And around the same time, the Henan Provincial government reported through the China News Service that Henan Province discovered its first case of AIDS in 1995, with

a total of 2,065 infected persons identified, 335 ill and 238 dead. It is very suspicious that there should be such a wide variance in these figures, especially between external and internal sources. Officials of Henan Province, you should recognize your guilt!

This is a good place to remind officials, when you start lying and deceiving the people, your soul begins to distort. You have embarked on the slippery slope of public loathing for which you will ultimately bear the consequences.

Listening to the villagers leads me to wonder if there is any hope for Shangcai County. The impression this place gives to people with AIDS and to outside observers is of a hell on earth where snow falls in June. Don't keep asking why it is that we always make trouble for the Henan government. It is because you have so horribly wronged the people of Henan. Only if we lose our conscience, or become deaf and blind, can we possibly consider leaving you in peace. We are supporting the villagers in their efforts to record the visit of the WHO delegation to Shangcai County, and we will continue by passing this record on to the WHO office in Beijing. We have also assisted some of the more daring villagers to install phone lines and go onto the Internet, and we are helping with the education of AIDS orphans. We have provided cameras and computer equipment to the villagers so they can record the tragedy around them and become witnesses to history against officials who attempt to evade the truth.

We make the following short-term recommendations:

- 1) The WHO team of experts should return to Shangcai County and other AIDS-affected areas of Henan Province to examine precautions against SARS. The Beijing Aizhixing Institute will assist people with HIV/AIDS in Henan to organize, and will also lead WHO officials through AIDS-affected villages and put them in contact with villagers, in order for them to understand the true situation of AIDS and SARS.
- 2) If another trip to Henan is too difficult to organize, we could arrange for villagers from AIDS-affected villages to visit the WHO office in Beijing and testify regarding the local situation. We could find truthful witnesses from Shangcai County's Houyang Village, Shilipu Village and Wenlou Village, including villagers who have been arrested.
- 3) The central government should remove from office all local officials who have been responsible for covering up the true situation of AIDS in Henan Province all these years, including the general secretary of Henan Province, Li Kejiang, the director of Henan Province's Health Department, Ma Jianzhong, the former health director, Liu Quanxi, deputy director Liu Xuezhou, the general secretary of Shangcai County, Yang Songquan, the county vice-chairman, Nie Yong, the director of the AIDS Prevention Office, Feng Shipeng and others.

We make the following long-term recommendations:

- 1) SARS has brought about the greatest economic and political crisis to China since the events at Tiananmen in 1989. Even June 4th did not so directly harm China's international relations. SARS is a disease without boundaries; because the Chinese government did not under-

stand the seriousness of the disease at first, public health procedures were inadequate and initial prevention methods were too passive, with the ultimate result that Chinese all over the world were treated unfairly. After SARS became widespread in Beijing and military surgeon Jiang Yanyong revealed the cover-up by the Ministry of Health and the Beijing municipal government, the international community roundly blamed China for its irresponsible actions, and the government was forced to be more open about the epidemic and take more extensive precautions against its spread, sacking two officials, Zhang Wenkang and Meng Xuenong, and promising full cooperation with the WHO. We must preserve the policies that came about at such a great price. China's people, research institutions, domestic and overseas media, and the international community must increase their monitoring of the government to make sure the policies are preserved and continued rather than discarded.

- 2) SARS is an acute respiratory disease, but most of those who contract it can be cured. AIDS, by contrast, is relatively dormant, and there is no cure for it at this time. Its long term effects are much more serious than SARS. The public mobilization efforts deployed against SARS should be similarly applied to fighting AIDS.
- 3) As with SARS, public health officials need the full participation of all segments of society in the fight against AIDS. Civil society organizations and the news media are especially important. We recommend that the central government immediately eliminate the present restrictions for registering non-government organizations (NGOs) and non-profit organizations (NPOs), make the registration system more open, and support the development of civil society. In addition, the government should ban the Central Propaganda Department, the news controlling organization that is a notorious roadblock to free expression, and the media should be given full autonomy in revealing social problems and reflecting the views of the people. This would help prevent future social, public health and ecological crises.

Tip of the Iceberg

Once the SARS crisis has passed, we will visit Shangcai County again and directly ask the head of the AIDS Prevention Office, Feng Shipeng, if he dares to say again that AIDS is a national secret.

Officials of Henan Province, I am willing to enter into a public dialogue with you. If you can prove me wrong, no one will be happier than I. If any of my facts are wrong, I will accept full responsibility.

Dr. Jiang Yanyong revealed Beijing's true situation to the world, and in fact his efforts undoubtedly saved many lives. Health Minister Zhang Wenkang and the Beijing mayor and deputy party chief Meng Xuenong lost their jobs because of the cover-up, and this launched the government's genuine efforts to fight SARS. If not for this, who knows how many more people would have died. Is Shangcai County too small

and unimportant, are its residents' voices too far away and too weak, to warrant disciplinary measures against any of its officials? The fact is that in Shangcai County alone, over the long term more people die of AIDS every day than the number of people who died of SARS in the whole world at the height of the epidemic. More people have died of AIDS in Shangcai County than the total number who died of SARS worldwide. Many villages see several deaths from AIDS on any given day. In Shilipu Village sometimes three people die of AIDS in one day. A corpse is not even cold in one house before cries of mourning rise in the next lane. At the end of last year we visited several AIDS-stricken villagers in Houyang Village, aged 5 to 60 years old. Within two months all were dead. The 5-year-old was a boy named Zhou Mao who had been battling the disease since birth. This year on February 15 his parents took him to watch the fireworks in a nearby town, and a few hours later he breathed his last. There is no way of knowing whether he suffered in death or if in fact death released him from suffering.

Last summer the United Nations published a report called, "HIV/AIDS: China's Titanic Peril." We believe that SARS will come under control internationally by July and will quickly recede from memory. But AIDS will remain with us for the long term. SARS is merely a bee sting compared with the cobra bite of AIDS.

	Death Rate	Infected	Distribution
AIDS	100%	More than 1 million (2002 Ministry of Health estimate) nationwide	nationwide
SARS	5%-15%	5,322 (as announced by Ministry of Health, May 27)	26 provinces

During the height of the SARS crisis, the news media reported thoroughly on SARS every day, and the Ministry of Health held a press conference at 4 p.m. every day to brief the media on the situation. We would like to see similar attention paid to AIDS. If there were some system in place to provide full and open information on AIDS, this would greatly improve the public's knowledge regarding the disease and help contain its spread.

I know that this report is likely to have little effect, but I hope anyone who reads it will pass it along to others, and if possible that it might reach the hands of senior officials and the international community so they can understand what is going on at the local levels. These few days I have been making an accurate record of all that the villagers tell me. They are so full of frustration that they cannot hold anything back. How can our people flourish under such officials? How can our country advance? These officials are like a cancer. They must be removed so our country will not collapse, but will be able to begin its recovery.

Translated by Stacy Mosher