

Why China's buildings crumbled

Survivors blame corruption, shoddy construction and cost cutting for the collapse of so many 'tofu buildings' – and even state media outlets are asking questions

GEOFFREY YORK
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DUJIANGYAN, CHINA — The bodies of the children were lined up in a long row in the mud of a basketball court, just outside the flattened school. Every few minutes, another corpse was brought out of the rubble, carried on a wooden door, covered in rags.

In a futile attempt at privacy, the bodies were sheltered by beach umbrellas or pup tents, incongruously set up in the mud. Grieving parents sat wailing or numb in tiny school chairs beside the bodies. In the Chinese tradition, they burned paper money and lit candles and incense sticks for the victims. Then, in an explosion of firecrackers, they bid a final farewell to their children.

The death toll in Monday's earthquake in Sichuan province is still soaring. More than 40,000 people are dead, missing or buried in the rubble, according to the latest count. And with dangerous cracks appearing in several hydro dams and reservoirs around the earthquake zone, another disaster could be looming.

But while rescue crews fought to reach the victims, awkward questions were being asked about the tragedy. One man, gazing at the corpse of his nine-year-old cousin, said he had disturbing evidence that could explain the collapse of the five-storey Juyuan school building, along with eight other schools in the region.

The man, who gave his surname as Ren, is a 32-year-old steel worker who has worked for a decade in the local construction industry. He said he always knew that the Juyuan school was a disaster in waiting. Local officials, he said, had pocketed money that was budgeted for the school, while a private construction company had saved money by cutting corners on the project.

After the temblor, when he picked up a chunk of concrete from the flattened school, he was appalled by the evidence of shoddy construction. "It crumbled very easily," he said.

To boost its profits, the company used iron instead of steel in many parts of the construction of the building, Mr. Ren said. It cut back on the size and number of steel braces in the cement foundation slabs. And it used cheap materials to make the concrete walls, weakening the entire structure.

"The supervising agencies did not check to see if it met the national standards," he said.

Several hundred students died in the collapse of Juyuan school on Monday.

One of them was Mr. Ren's cousin, Li Xianmin.

"I felt pain when I saw his body," Mr. Ren said.

"He was a good student and a good boy. His class had 65 students.

"All of them died, except for one boy who jumped from the second floor and another who had asked for leave on that day."

Many other survivors were convinced that corruption had played a role in determining which buildings collapsed and which were unscathed. One man pointed to a new building whose first floor had collapsed, even as older buildings around it were intact. "They used fewer bricks in the new building, so they could earn more money," he said.

The shoddily constructed buildings are commonly called "tofu buildings" because of their weak structural condition.

Even the state-controlled media are raising questions about unsafe construction of schools.

"We cannot afford not to raise uneasy questions about the structural quality of school buildings," the China Daily said in a commentary after the quake.

More than 48 hours after the earthquake, there were still miraculous discoveries of survivors in the rubble of some buildings.

At about 5 p.m. yesterday, a man named He Yang was found in a collapsed six-storey apartment building in Dujiangyan.

Doctors quickly set up an intravenous drip to keep him alive.

His mother and uncle were ecstatic, but then they realized that he was trapped and could not be easily rescued.

The rescue workers asked whether they could attempt a risky operation, using heavy equipment to move the rubble to reach him.

It was an agonizing dilemma.

His family members agreed to the rescue, knowing that he would be injured but at least would have a chance at life.

Others accused the government of misallocating its rescue efforts, giving higher priority to government officials and wealthy people who were trapped in buildings. "My sister is inside there," said a crying woman outside the collapsed six-storey building.

"We could hear her, but the rescue workers did not try to rescue her until we knelt on the ground to beg them. This morning they stopped their work and I couldn't hear my sister's voice any more."