

A Reassessment of How Many Died In the Military Crackdown in Beijing

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More than two weeks after the Chinese Army gunned down demonstrators and onlookers in the center of Beijing, there is still no evidence to support some of the higher estimates of casualties, like an early American estimate that 3,000 died.

Nor is there any evidence to support the Government's assertion that as many as 100 or more soldiers were killed by "ruffians" in what it describes as the suppression of the "counterrevolutionary rebellion."

The true number of deaths will probably never be known, and it is possible that thousands of people were killed without leaving evidence behind. But based on the evidence that is now available, it seems plausible that about a dozen soldiers and policemen were killed, along with 400 to 800 civilians.

Some of the early estimates of thousands of deaths, including the American estimate, were based on reports that the Chinese Red Cross had counted 2,600 deaths. But the Chinese Red Cross has denied saying any such thing, and this seems to have been an offshoot of two other rumors that variously used the figure of 2,600 to describe the number of students who were missing and the number of students who were killed. 'We'll Never Know for Sure'

"We'll never know for sure how many were killed, unless the Chinese Government gives out more information," said a Western diplomat who has been

compiling estimates. This diplomat, who has been following the matter as closely as any diplomat in China, said his estimate is from 300 to 1,000 civilians killed, much lower than that of his home Government.

The Chinese Government has hampered investigations by instructing all hospitals and crematoriums not to issue any figures. Still, some reliable information can be pieced together at a number of hospitals, by accounts from friendly doctors or staff members.

Figures were obtained for eight hospitals, mostly in the area closest to the shooting, and they total 184 dead. But the numbers at two hospitals were obtained only hours after the shootings, and so the total almost certainly rose to 200 or more as those who were wounded died over the next few days.

In addition to these approximately 200 deaths, there were significant but somewhat lower casualties at 12 other hospitals, said a medical official with links to most hospitals. If these averaged 10 deaths each, that would add about 120 deaths to the total.

Then there were scattered deaths at an additional 20 hospitals, the official said. If these averaged two fatalities per hospital, that would be an additional 40 deaths, for a rudimentary total of somewhere around 360 deaths in the hospitals.

Some May Have Been Cremated

In addition to the deaths reported to the hospitals, there were some bodies that were taken away by students or by friends of the dead and never taken to a hospital. These may bring the total number of dead to 400 or 500.

Finally, many people suspect that troops burned the bodies of many citizens to destroy the evidence of the killings. After soldiers sealed Tiananmen Square about dawn that day, a large bonfire could be seen coming from the square. While it may have been the tents and other remnants of the students' encampment on the square, some fear it was also used to cremate the students' bodies.

There are many witness accounts of a mass killing around the Monument to the People's Heroes at the center of the square. But most of these accounts began to appear after several days had passed, rather than immediately, and they directly contradict the accounts of other Chinese and foreigners who were on the square all night.

Among them were several European journalists, and both they and Chinese students who were interviewed shortly afterward say that the people clustered around the monument were allowed to leave peacefully about 5:30 A.M. There is

also Chinese television footage of this group of students leaving peacefully.

A French journalist who says he left the square with the students in the early morning reports that several dozen workers appeared to remain behind, and that in addition a small number of students may have been inside tents on the square. If these people were all killed and their bodies burned that would add dozens to the death toll, but not hundreds or thousands. The Government Figures

There were also reports of students being killed, after they left Tiananmen Square in the early morning, in the area around the square and in particular near the Beijing concert hall. If this did happen, it would have been quite easy for troops to carry the bodies to Tiananmen Square to be burned, without anyone in the area seeing what they were doing.

Therefore, in addition to the 400 or 500 people who may have died in hospitals, who were taken to hospital morgues, or whose bodies were recovered by students or ordinary citizens, there may have been dozens or perhaps even several hundred more whose bodies were burned by troops. But there is no real evidence that this happened, and it would be difficult to imagine that thousands were disposed of in this way.

If some students seem to have exaggerated the civilian death toll, it is also clear that the Government's account is inaccurate. While the Government asserts that troops fired only in self-defense, they were seen by many foreign correspondents repeatedly firing their machine guns at civilians, even those who were fleeing.

The Government spokesman, Yuan Mu, said on June 7 that nearly 300 people were killed, and he strongly implied that half or more were soldiers. Last Wednesday, the official New China News Agency put the number of dead at nearly 100 soldiers and about 100 civilians.

The Government has played up attacks against soldiers to win sympathy, and some of the deaths have been described on television over and over each day. While it would therefore seem that the Government would dwell on as many deaths of soldiers or policemen as were available, the authorities have so far specifically described the deaths of only nine soldiers and two policemen, suggesting that there are not many more.

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