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2008 turns out to be a year of trouble for China

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BEIJING -- China hoped 2008 would be a yearlong celebration, a time to bask in the spotlight of the upcoming Beijing Olympics. Instead, the Year of the Rat has also brought a wave of troubles _ both natural and man-made _ that are putting a heavy strain on the communist leadership.

The 7.9 magnitude earthquake that struck Sichuan province Monday, killing thousands, is only the latest.

China has long experience with large-scale disasters _ from coal mine explosions to chemical spills to floods that displace tens of thousands.

The central government prides itself on its ability to quickly react, usually with deployments from China's huge military corps. The ruling party's mandate in part rests on being able to deliver aid in emergencies.

But China's capacity to control disasters and how they play out in the media is being stretched this year. Its leaders are grappling with the fallout from multiple problems in the information-hungry Internet age when they had expected to focus only on the Olympics.

"The Olympics are an important symbol of China's effort to ... get on the same gauge with the rest of the world. So they have attached a lot of importance to them," said Roger Des Forges, a China historian at University at Buffalo, State University of New York.

"But for most Chinese people, they are secondary to the quality of life that they are trying to achieve. So these questions of disasters are uppermost in people's minds, watching how the government is going to deal with them," he said.

China was quick to show its public response to Monday's quake. Just hours after it struck, Premier Wen Jiabao flew into Sichuan Province to oversee the emergency relief effort. Speaking from Dujiangyan City, where a high school collapsed, burying some 900 students, Wen acknowledged on national TV the task will be "especially challenging."

This year, China's problems began just before February's Lunar New Year, when the worst snowstorms in five decades hit the densely populated southern and central region. They left scores dead, knocked out power across cities, and stranded hundreds of thousands during the country's single busiest travel period.

Meanwhile, its leaders also battled decade-high levels of inflation and struggled to improve the nation's image as a global manufacturer following last year's tainted drugs and food scandal and defective toy exports.

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In March, huge anti-government riots erupted in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, sparking sympathy protests in Tibetan areas across western China. The violent protests were the biggest challenge to Chinese rule in the Himalayan region in nearly two decades.

The subsequent government crackdown brought sharp international criticism of Beijing's human rights record and its rule over Tibet. China has said that 22 people were killed, while Tibetan groups have said that many times that number died in the violence.

Thousands of troops were deployed across a wide swath of the country to tamp down unrest and restore order. But their massive presence continued to draw an unwelcome spotlight on China's harsh rule in Tibet.

The negative attention spilled over to the Olympic flame's around-the-world tour. Meant to be a feel-good kickoff event to the Beijing Games, the relay turned into chaos as pro-Tibet protesters mounted demonstrations from the very start of the ceremonial lighting in Greece, and at stops including London, Paris, and San Francisco.

The bad news kept coming. In May was China's worst train accident in a decade, leaving 72 dead and more than 400 injured when a high-speed passenger train jumped its tracks and slammed into another in rural Shandong province. Excessive speed was determined to be the cause, and five railway officials were promptly fired.

This month also brought a sharp rise in the number of reported cases of hand, foot, and mouth disease, a normally non-deadly viral infection that has killed 39 children this year and infected nearly 30,000 others.

Only last week's feat by a team of Tibetan and Han Chinese mountaineers in bringing the Olympic flame up Mount Everest gave China the positive publicity it craved, three months to the day before the start of the games.

Beijing's leaders had carefully chosen Aug. 8 as the opening day for the 2008 games (8-8-08), believing that it was an especially auspicious day. Many Chinese people in this officially atheist nation remain highly superstitious. The number eight, "ba" in Chinese, is closely associated with prosperity and good luck because it sounds similar to the word "fa," which means rich.

China spared no expense on its Olympic debut, spending an estimated \$40 billion on improving infrastructure and building sports venues. Its money was apparently well-spent. None of the venues, 31 of them in Beijing alone, was reportedly damaged.

Li Jiulin, a top engineer on the 91,000-seat National Stadium known as the Bird's Nest _ the jewel of the Olympics _ was conducting an inspection at the venue when the quake occurred. He said the building was designed to withstand up to an 8.0-magnitude quake.

"The Olympic venues were not affected by the earthquake," said Sun Weide, a spokesman for the Beijing Olympic Organizing Committee. "We considered earthquakes when building those venues."

Ultimately, the series of crises could prompt China to reassess its true priorities, said Des Forges.

"I think there may be some way in which these crises are reminding the government that, as important as the games are, there are perhaps more important issues that need to be addressed," he said.

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Associated Press writer Stephen Wade contributed to this report.

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