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Anti-lockdown protests spread in China as anger rises over zero-Covid strategy

Sunday 27 November 2022, by [DAVIDSON Helen](#), [YU Verna](#) (Date first published: 27 November 2022).

Beijing students shout 'freedom will prevail', as Urumqi fire prompts levels of disobedience unprecedented in Xi era

Police officers detain people during a protest against Covid curbs in Shanghai.

02:07 'Xi Jinping, step down!': anti-lockdown protests spread across China - video

Protests against China's stringent Covid restrictions have intensified, as a wave of civil disobedience triggered by a deadly fire in the far west reached levels in the mainland not seen since [Xi Jinping](#) assumed power a decade ago.

At Beijing's elite Tsinghua University, students shouted "freedom will prevail" and called for an end to lockdowns, while crowds also returned to Middle Urumqi Road in Shanghai for a second day, and pushed down pandemic barricades in Wuhan.

In an unusually bold act that appeared to indicate the level of people's desperation, a crowd in Shanghai had [called for the removal of the Communist party and Xi](#) in a standoff with police late on Saturday, according to videos circulated on Twitter. Chinese people usually refrain from criticising the party and its leaders in public for fear of reprisals. "Communist party! Step down! Xi Jinping! Step down!" they chanted.

In [other footage](#), people chanted: "No PCR tests, we want freedom!" followed by rounds of repeated calls for "Freedom! Freedom!" The slogan [echoed the call of a lone protester in Beijing in October](#).

According to photos posted on Chinese social media, a note stuck to a lamppost on Middle Urumqi Road, in an upmarket part of Shanghai, says: "To our friends in Urumqi: I love you like I love this road, like I love my family. November 26th, 22."

Other photos show a candlelit vigil in front of a luxury apartment compound on the same street, among a sea of white candles, with a cardboard sign reading: "Urumqi November 24. May those who died rest in peace."

Despite many documented police arrests of protesters on Saturday, people returned to the streets of Shanghai - China's biggest city and a global financial hub in the east of the country - on Sunday.

In Beijing, a Tsinghua University student told AFP some students held up a blank piece of paper near the canteen at about 11.30am, and 200-300 people had joined them by the afternoon. Blank sheets have become a symbol of the burgeoning protests.

According to videos shared online, protesters shouted: "This is not normal life, we've had enough. Our lives were not like this before."

Widespread in-person protests are rare in China, where room for dissent has been all but eliminated under Xi, forcing citizens mostly to vent on social media where they play cat-and-mouse games with censors.

A demonstration erupted on Friday in Urumqi, the regional capital of the far west Xinjiang region, [where at least 10 people died and nine others were injured a day earlier](#) in a fire in a residential building. Many believe they died because they were unable to escape due to Covid restrictions - a claim the local government denied.

Photos and videos circulated on Chinese social media seen by the Guardian were quickly removed by internet censors, but many continued to circulate on Twitter, which is blocked in China.

According to photos and videos on Sina Weibo that were later deleted, in the Communication University of China at Nanjing, in eastern China, two students held up white sheets of paper on a campus plaza on Saturday. By night, they were joined by crowds of students who lit up their mobile phones and sang the national anthem with its lyric "Rise up, those who refuse to be slaves." They chanted: "Ten thousand years to the people. May the dead rest in peace!"

One of the young men was cheered by the crowd as he said: "I used to be a coward, but today I have to speak up for those who have perished!" Calls to the university for comment were unanswered.

Among other images circulating on social media, a young man standing in front of what looks like a Covid testing station, holds up a piece of paper saying: "Grievously commemorating Nov 24 fire victims."

In reference to tragedies that occurred due to Covid restrictions, a placard worn on the back of another young man says: "I was in the bus which turned over ... I was among those who walked hundreds of miles [to escape], I was the person who jumped to death, I was the person who was trapped in the fire - if I wasn't these people, the next one will be me."

Social media users said he was from the Northwest Political Science and Law University, but his identity could not be verified.

In Shanghai, the message "Do not stay silent" was spray-painted on to a red billboard celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Eastern China University of Political Science and Law.

At the Qingdao Film Academy in eastern China, a piece of paper stuck on the entrance read: "Mourning the November 24 fire victims. Do not become indifferent. Do not stay silent. Do not forget."

The Guardian has verified the locations of these pictures.

Video footage said to be filmed in Beijing showed people singing the Internationale and chanting "Freedom or death!" outside a housing compound during the night. The location could not be confirmed.

A video, purportedly filmed in Guangzhou, showed crowds tearing down lockdown barriers in a housing compound, while another - purportedly filmed in Tongzhou near Beijing - also showed crowds crushing lockdown barriers while chanting "No to PCR tests". Their locations could not be independently verified.

China Digital Times, a US-based news website, reported that protests also occurred in Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts in the north-west and Sichuan Foreign Languages University in the south-

west.

Prof Chung Kim-wah, a social scientist formerly with the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, said that although widespread, the protests were unlikely to threaten the central government. He expected the government would use both appeasement and crackdown to defuse the discontent.

“One needs to observe whether the anti-Xi slogans will spread, but Xi could shift the responsibility [to local authorities] as [the central government] can say it’s the local governments who have over-enforced” the Covid curbs, he said, referring to a government announcement on 11 November that [eased some restrictions](#) and urged local officials to refrain from indiscriminate Covid restrictions.

Verna Yu and Helen Davidson in Taipei

P.S.

- The Guardian. Sun 27 Nov 2022 10.45 GMT:
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