



After you, boss...

Role change

National A4

Life C6

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Daily danger on nation's bridges

Lulu Chen

It was a treacherous daily trip across the decrepit Qiantun village bridge and this time it ended badly, as many had feared.

At dawn, the old bridge was muddy after the previous day's rain when Li Maotong, 52, and his wife, Li Shiping, 47, rode their motorbike heading out of the Hebei (河北) village on August 2.

They were most of the way across the 200 meter bridge, a narrow muddy span just four metres wide with broken rails and deep cracks in the roadbed.

Suddenly, the bike slid out from under them, and they slipped over

the edge, falling six meters to the hard riverbed below. "I passed out for like five seconds and felt blood gush out of my nose," Li Maotong said. "Not far away I saw my wife bleeding and not moving at all."

Li suffered a few scratches and a fractured brow. His wife broke two ribs and her spine and may never walk again.

Li Shiping cannot afford the surgery needed to mend her back. She lies half naked on a wooden bed in her hot room, hoping that by lying straight the wound will heal. She's frustrated and angry but barely has strength to speak.

The bridge that the couple, and hundreds of other villagers, commut-

ed on daily is just one of the tens of thousands of unsafe bridges on the mainland, many built in the 1970s and identified as hazardous by the government in recent years.

But Beijing has made no concerted effort to fix the bridges. Instead, funds go to build new roads, rail lines and other infrastructure projects. Local officials face funding problems and bureaucratic obstacles. Meanwhile, villagers, hoping to avoid tragedy, have little choice but to use the decrepit bridges - many of which have no guard rails, while some have deep cracks, even holes, in their roadways, and others are so structurally unsound that they could simply topple over.

"You can't wait until people die to start paying attention and making an effort," said Zuo Chunhe, a Hebei National People's Congress representative. "This is totally irresponsible of the local government."

But while Beijing is spending 4 trillion yuan (HK\$4.56 trillion), almost half on infrastructure, the number of unstable bridges is not likely to go down anytime soon. Bridge repair is rarely a top priority.

Local governments tend to invest more in property projects and urban planning, reflecting a preference for projects that directly boost GDP, according to Zhu Xiaoding, a lawyer researching unsafe bridges at Beijing

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A villager (above) in Hebei province picks up his motorbike after nearly tumbling off a treacherous bridge where one woman suffered a serious injury after a crash with her husband. Another bridge in the province (left and right) where a villager died after falling from it. Despite the accident, the warning sign and concrete obstacle, villagers still use the bridge. Photos: Lulu Chen



PLA navy repels pirates with grenades, bullets

Greg Torode

The PLA navy has displayed a fresh appetite to confront pirates plaguing vital sea lanes off the Horn of Africa, breaking up recent attacks on shipping with stun grenades and machine-gun fire.

PLA commanders appear determined to showcase the potential of the large amphibious assault ship Kunlunshan just as monsoonal calms spark fresh attacks by Somali pirates on ships plying the Indian

Ocean trade routes linking Asia to Europe and the Middle East.

State media reports and CCTV military broadcasts have highlighted an incident on August 28 when three waves of fast-moving pirate skiffs attempted to attack a convoy of 21 commercial ships under PLA escort.

The incident comes in a high-profile week for China's rapidly modernising navy, with ships fresh from unprecedented exercises in the Mediterranean sailing up the Irrawaddy River to stop in Yangon, Myanmar,

while another crossed the Coral Sea to visit Vanuatu and Tonga as part of a Pacific tour.

Helicopters launched from the 17,600-tonne Kunlunshan and the destroyer Lanzhou helped repel the pirate skiffs, with marines firing stun grenades and heavy machine guns to warn off the pirates, who later fled the area.

At one point a skiff came within less than a nautical mile of the freighter Haijie, the PLA Daily reported, but was chased off. Special opera-

tions troops were then placed aboard the slow-moving ship for extra protection.

Just as it marked new tactics from the pirates, who attacked the convoy at several different points in a battle that lasted more than 30 minutes, it also revealed higher levels of organisation and co-ordination from the PLA.

While the incident was not witnessed by foreign navies, PLA officials have outlined the incident to

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News Digest

HK & Delta

Tien knocks 'miserly' government
Former Liberal Party chairman James Tien Pei-chun criticises the government for being miserly in amassing a reserve of HK\$2.2 trillion while turning a blind eye to the plight of the underprivileged. The wealth gap has sparked anti-business sentiment, he warns. **Full report A3**

Business

Land speculation spreads to mid-tier cities
With land increasingly difficult to secure in the mainland's leading cities, developers are starting to move into mid-tier cities like Zhengzhou (郑州), in Henan (河南) province, bringing a first wave of real estate speculators with them. By at least one measure, central Zhengzhou is now nearly as unaffordable as Beijing. **Full report B1**

City

Illegal structures cost taxpayers HK\$10m
Lands officials are failing to track down most of the people responsible for thousands of illegal structures on government land, leaving a big bill for taxpayers. In the past five years, the government has paid HK\$10.1 million to remove these structures but only HK\$11,000 - 0.1 per cent - has been recovered. **Full report C1**

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Inquiry hears how national police chief left midway, assault was bungled

Manila officials admit errors in hostage crisis

Raissa Robles in Manila, Martin Wong and Agence France-Presse

A top Philippine official and a senior policeman admitted in a public hearing yesterday that the force made a series of errors when handling the Manila bus hijacking in which eight Hongkongers were shot dead.

Interior Undersecretary Rico Puno and the country's police chief Jesus Verzosa said there were repeated opportunities for snipers to shoot the hijacker during the stand-off.

The country's police chief left Manila halfway through the crisis, the force's best-trained unit sat out a bungled assault on the bus and the media were allowed to run wild, the inquiry was told.

The five-man investigation panel went behind closed doors at one point. One member of the panel, Roan Libarios, later told reporters that they were told that four of the hostages may have died "as a result of the assault".

During the questioning of Manila police chief Rodolfo Magtibay in the open session, Libarios asked: "Would you consider that [assault] successful, with the deaths of the four as a result of the assault?" Magtibay replied that Manila's SWAT team tried its best.

But when Magtibay was asked by another panel member whether he was confirming that four hostages



A Hong Kong police official takes photos before the start of the inquiry in Manila. Photo: EPA

died during the assault, Magtibay replied: "I am not."

Panel member Teresita Ang-See, said in the open session that some victims may have been shot by the police SWAT team after disgruntled former policeman Rolando Mendoza turned his gun on them.

"There were a lot of chances where we could [have taken] him down," Puno told the inquiry. "The general idea then was we would just tire him out and he would release the hostages." Also, Puno expressed fears that if the gunman was killed, his relatives might sue the police.

Philippine President Benigno Aquino, Magtibay, and the crisis management team leader, Manila mayor Alfredo Lim, were sitting in a Chinese restaurant "command centre" a short distance away from the bus at the time the shooting began. But the restaurant had no TV, and when one was requisitioned, it turned out to be broken.

These were a few of the errors and unfortunate events disclosed in the 10-hour hearing, chaired by Justice Secretary Leila De Lima.

The first thing that went wrong was when the hostages were wrongly identified as Koreans. Korean Embassy personnel went there and realised the error. Only then did Chinese diplomats go to the scene.

But Chinese Embassy spokesman Ethan Sun confirmed to the *South China Morning Post* yesterday that Ambassador Liu Jianchao (劉建超) was in Beijing that day, leaving no one to communicate with Aquino.

Sun said the highest official the embassy reached that day was Lim. An aide to Hong Kong Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen had also tried to get Aquino on the phone but failed.

Aquino told aides he would not take any phone calls because he was too busy monitoring events. At one point he suggested going to the scene himself, but Puno said he talked him

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