Is SARS China's Chernobyl?

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WASHINGTON — Because of early official denials and cover-ups of the extent of the spread of the SARS virus, some analysts have christened this crisis “China's Chernobyl.”

The initial secrecy of the former Soviet regime after the Chernobyl nuclear accident, which completely ignored the interests of public health, is considered by historians to be one of the final blunders of a closed totalitarian system that ultimately led to its collapse. In the wake of that disaster, Mikhail Gorbachev was compelled to accelerate the policy of “glasnost”—or transparency and openness—as a means to recover legitimacy for Communist Party rule. But, as Gorbachev discovered, opening a closed system necessarily spells its demise.

Will the same be true for China?

The fast-spreading SARS virus and the mounting death toll of victims have caused worldwide attention and anxiety. Neglected by outside observers, however, have been frantic rumors within China that have aroused the public imagination. These include the notion that SARS emanated from China's biological weapons research facilities. Indeed, many Chinese believe the Chinese Communist Party secretly backed Osama bin Laden as a way to menace the United States. Some suggest China and Russia were more likely to provide him with these means of terror than Iraq. There is even a wild rumor that Al Qaeda threatened, in a flier in December, that an unprecedented catastrophe would strike Hong Kong in 2003.

True or not, these rumors reveal the fragile legitimacy of regimes, such as China or the old Soviet Union,

that are based upon totalitarian control of information: When governments cannot be trusted to tell the truth, people will believe anything. Then, when such a regime admits its lies, it does so at its own peril.

To dampen rumors about biological-weapons leakage and to demonstrate that the government was implementing measures to combat SARS, China's new paramount leader, Hu Jintao, recently conducted a highly publicized inspection tour, including the Chinese Military Medical Academy, a bio-military research facility.

No doubt, if the SARS crisis continues to worsen to epidemic proportions in China, Hu's belated glasnosticism will undermine his credibility, not enhance it. Everyone is already asking, “Why didn't he act sooner? How can we live in a system that values control of information above public health?”

During the Gorbachev era in the Soviet Union, the internal fighting was intense at the leadership level. Each faction used the others' failures as an offensive

weapon, causing an even further erosion of confidence in the leadership. The same thing is happening in today's China. Hiding information about something as dangerous as SARS could only

have been sanctioned at the highest levels—the Politburo and Secretariat. No mere minister of health or Beijing mayor would have the guts or power to hide this kind of information. Their recent dismissal was the usual story: Lower officials are scapegoats for high-level irresponsibility.

What is unusual this time is that the scapegoats are from different factions. One is from Hu Jintao's side; the other is allied with Jiang Zemin, Hu's predecessor

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and continuing competitor. Were they having fierce internal fights and unable to collaborate with each other, causing paralysis as SARS spread rapidly around the country? Or, having suddenly realized the stakes, have they decided on a truce where each side loses one scapegoat each in order to save their common skin—the Communist Party?

We don't know. We only know this: Most Chinese believe that the Communist regime is guilty of concealing information about an infectious disease that threatens the entire country. The Communist government had to admit this fact, and the implications must be clear.

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Finally, there is a big difference between the SARS disaster and Chernobyl. During the Chernobyl crisis, Western democratic countries heavily criticized the Soviet Union. That pressure is, in large part, what made Chernobyl a turning point that led to Soviet collapse.

By contrast, Western leaders today need Beijing's support in their own internal dispute over Iraq and in dealing with North Korea. More than a shame, it would be an historic mistake to let this opportunity to make China's leaders accountable to their own people and to the world at large vanish. The virus next time is sure to be more virulent.