

Survivor won't forget Tiananmen

Event transformed man
from Communist to activist

By AUDRA ANG
The Associated Press

BEIJING — Twenty years after China's military crushed dissent around Tiananmen Square, the details still are fresh in Qi Zhiyong's mind. The acrid smell of tear gas. The people run down by tanks. The dizzying pain when a bullet tore through his left leg.

The student-led protests in the heart of the Chinese capital had gone on for weeks, an extraordinary call for political freedom and an end to government corruption. Sparked by the April 15 death of a beloved Communist Party chief deposed by hard-liners, they were mostly peaceful, even after martial law was declared May 20.

But late on June 3, 1989, the government lost its patience.

"I saw people being run over. Blood sprayed everywhere," said Qi, then a 33-year-old construction worker. "The tanks kept moving, as if the people weren't there. My hair stood on end. I was chilled to the bone."

Witnessing the crackdown and losing his leg transformed Qi from a loyal Communist Party supporter into an activist with a simple goal: speaking out about the events which the leadership has all but erased from history.

His efforts cost him his job, his wife and his freedom. But a new-found Christian faith and pure doggedness have kept him going.

The government never has offered a full accounting and has made virtually all public discussion taboo. It says its suppression of "counterrevolutionary" riots preserved social stability and paved the way for economic success.

Throughout the years, Qi, has given interviews to foreign media and overseas rights groups. He has been detained many times. Security agents follow him and keep watch over the 135-square-foot home he shares with his second wife, their 12-year-old daughter and another family in southwest Beijing.

Qi said he and his family are forced by state security to leave the capital during sensitive periods such as last year's Beijing Olympics, when the government wanted to showcase only the country's good side. Last month, Qi said, his freedom was already being restricted ahead of the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen protests. Security agents warned: "Behave yourself. ... Sooner or later, you will be imprisoned this year, even if you are disabled."



GREG BAKER | The Associated Press

Qi Zhiyong prays March 22 at an underground church meeting in an apartment in Beijing, China. Twenty years after losing a leg when he was shot by Chinese troops, Qi is among the few in the country who will speak openly about the events of Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

Right after his leg was amputated, Qi said, he often wore shorts to show off his scars and told his story to anyone who asked. He says his state-run company, which laid him off because of his injury, offered him 100,000 yuan (\$27,000 in 1989) in exchange for his silence on how he lost his leg — a proposition he refused.

"I told them I would tell this story for the rest of my life. This is not just my own story. I would be mad if I took that offer," Qi said. "I have a responsibility to this nation, to this world."

He is an avid storyteller, pausing for drama in some places, adding sound effects in others. His voice is deep, the words drawn out.

The demonstrations began when students put up posters praising deposed chief Hu Yaobang and indirectly criticizing the hard-liners who forced his resignation. Thousands marched in Beijing and Shanghai shouting, "Long live Hu Yaobang! Long live democracy!"

Within days, tens of thousands of students surged past police lines and filled Tiananmen Square. The protests soon spread to other cities.

In mid-May, students began a hunger strike at Tiananmen, forcing the government to move a welcoming ceremony for visiting Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev to the airport. The numbers in the square and surrounding streets — including workers and farmers — swelled at several points to 1 million.

The afternoon of June 3, Qi was riding his bicycle to work south of Tiananmen Square when he saw people running and smelled tear gas.

Around 11 p.m., Qi says, he followed his co-workers back to Tiananmen to see the 33-foot-tall "Goddess of Democracy," a Statue of Liberty

lookalike unveiled days before by the protesters.

But the scene had changed.

Tents, which had housed thousands of protesters for weeks, were empty or had collapsed. A young man rode up on a bike, his body covered in blood, saying soldiers had opened fire and killed people west of Tiananmen.

Qi, nervous and suddenly cold, said he wanted to go home, but his friends were intent on seeing the statue.

"I realized there were soldiers all around, with rifles, helmets and dark glasses," Qi said. "I was frightened because I had seen such scenes only on TV, in movies about German fascists."

Tanks were moving down the Avenue of Eternal Peace, Beijing's main thoroughfare, flattening guardrails "like they were noodles," Qi said.

Qi ran through alleyways near the square, trying to find somewhere to hide. A truck covered with canvas came into view. Soldiers jumped off the truck and advanced three in a row. People fled in terror.

"The next thing I saw was people falling one after another. Then I fell," Qi says, grimacing as he recalled being shot. "'Help me!' I shouted."

Qi eventually was put onto a small bus to a hospital, which he reached five hours after he was shot. His leg was amputated.

There are days Qi says he feels like his leg is still there, whether it's an itch or an ache. He stares out the window, his eyes sad as he thinks of the upcoming anniversary.

"Although today is a good day, tomorrow might be cloudy," Qi says. "I've started to feel the pain in my leg again."

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