

CNN One Thing

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Zero Patience for Zero-Covid in China



Speakers

David Rind (host), Ivan Watson, Bianca Nobilo, Poppy Harlow, Selina Wang, Erin Burnett, Uyghur Woman, Uyghur Man, Protestor, Protestors, Selina Wang (in Field), Man, Michael Holmes, Foxconn workers, Selina Wang (interview)

00:00:01

David Rind (host)

A few weeks ago on the show, we talked about the protests in Iran and just how rare it was to see such open dissent in a place like that. Well, if mass protests are rare in Iran, they are practically unheard of in China. Yet over the past week and a half, that is exactly what we've seen.

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Ivan Watson

Anger on the streets of Chinese cities. The biggest nationwide display of discontent this tightly controlled country has seen in a generation.

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Bianca Nobilo

Large crowds of protesters are openly defying the Chinese president and calling on him and the Communist Party to step down.

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David Rind (host)

Thousands of people took to the streets all over the country, angry and frustrated about the country's extremely harsh Covid restrictions.

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Poppy Harlow

Police have responded to the unrest with brutality. Chaotic scenes of protesters being dragged, shoved and beaten.

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David Rind (host)

My guest this week is CNN international correspondent Selina Wang. For months, she's been looking into the wide ranging repercussions of China's zero-covid policy. We talk about what put these protesters over the edge and what the government's response can tell us about its leader, Xi Jinping. Let's go to Beijing from CNN, this is One Thing I'm David Rind.

00:01:31

David Rind (host)

Selina, where does this story start?

00:01:34

Selina Wang

So these protests that we've been seeing sweeping across the country are the culmination of years of anger and frustration from people in China who have been living under these draconian zero COVID lockdowns. I mean, this has been going on pretty much since the start of the pandemic. People are stuck in this endless cycle of lockdowns, mass quarantine, mass testing. And that is why all of this pent up anger, it's finally bubbling over in China.

00:02:01

David Rind (host)

You know, I think when people in the US hear the words lockdown, they think of one thing. But what does that actually entail in China? Like what is the Zero-Covid policy in practice?

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Selina Wang

Yeah, I mean, I've been living through this myself. It's incredibly frustrating, pretty much for the entirety of this year. In order to do anything, I've got to stand in a long line to get a COVID test. It's fluctuated from one once a day, once every two days or once every three days. It's impossible really to make any plans, and every time you go in somewhere, you scan a code so the government knows where you are at all times. So when you're like, okay, I want to go meet a friend in a restaurant. Then you're like, Well, if I go into that restaurant, I run the risk of being identified as a close contact, because what if tomorrow there's a Covid case there? So me going to this restaurant with my friend, I'm basically putting myself at the risk of getting sent to a mass quarantine facility.

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David Rind (host)

So it could, like ruin your your rest of your week, rest of your month by just doing a simple thing, like going out to a restaurant.

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Selina Wang

Yeah, basically, like doing anything. Like going into a taxi, going into a park. You're like putting yourself into a lottery to have your whole life upended every single time. So it means that essentially for the past few years, if there's even a single Covid case or a small handful of Covid cases, a whole city could go into complete lockdown, or your whole neighborhood could go into complete lockdown. And I mean, lockdown, as in some cases your doors bolted shut, sealed shut fences around your entire compound.

00:03:37

Erin Burnett

They hear and see people starving. They hear the screams for food and medicine.

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Selina Wang

And there have been countless stories of people who have died because they couldn't get emergency help in lockdown because they couldn't get enough food.

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Erin Burnett

A desperate mother under lockdown jumping to her death from her 12th floor balcony.

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Selina Wang

These stories of suffering have played out over and over again. So you can imagine just how angry this would make the population.

00:04:01

Uyghur Woman

Translation: The fire started on the 15th floor, the smoke poisoned my family. The government could not stop the fire in time.

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Selina Wang

So on November 24th, there was a deadly fire in Urumqi. This is the capital of China's far west Xinjiang province. This fire occurred on a high floor of an apartment building and videos went viral on social media before censors were able to scrub all of them. And it shows the fire blazing and smoke coming from the building. And then you can see there are these tents and Covid fences surrounding the compound that appear to be preventing ambulances and fire trucks from getting close enough to the building.

00:04:43

Uyghur Man

Nats Translation: They could escape because the fire escape was blocked. And the fire escape to the roof of the building was also blocked.

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Selina Wang

And then the video shows water going up towards the building, but not actually reaching the fire because it's not close enough. And at least ten people died. Several more were injured, although some accounts say the death toll was higher than that. And that was really the straw that broke the camel's back, because there have been these heartbreaking stories just continuously for years.

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David Rind (host)

So these protests, protests in China in general are incredibly rare. Right. Like, what did this look like?

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Selina Wang

Yeah, protests are rare, now during Covid, we've seen a lot of localized uprisings in a community, you know, where people are just like I'm breaking out of lockdown, you know, let me out of here. What made these protests so rare was that it was happening sort of around the same time in multiple cities across China. We're talking about major cities, small cities, university campuses.

00:05:54
Protestor Nats

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Selina Wang And some of these protests turned into calls not just to end zero-covid, but into political demands. In Shanghai, there were chants. People were saying "Xi Jinping, [redacted]!". They were saying to Xi Jinping, step down. I mean, that is virtually unheard of.

00:06:22
Protestors Nats.

00:06:22
Selina Wang And so I was still, you know, just getting off live on air. And we got word that there was a protest breaking out in Beijing. So I rushed out to a central area of Beijing, and I found myself in the middle of a protest in the capital. It was surreal.

00:06:37
Selina Wang (in Field) People have gathered here in the center of Beijing to protest the COVID measures. We are installing district. This is the city center.

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Selina Wang So being in the middle of that protest in Beijing, there was a lot of excitement, there was some anxiety, there was a lot of energy. It was mostly young people and they were largely chanting. "[redacted] covid [redacted]", which means no more COVID tests. We want freedom.

00:07:03
Selina Wang (in Field) There is a heavy police presence. Am surrounded by police. They're telling me to shift in a little bit.

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Selina Wang And there was interesting discussion among protesters where some started to call for more political reforms. And then other people were saying, no, no, no, that's going too far. Right? Like, let's not go in that direction. Let's just focus this on Covid

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Man Interview nats.

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Selina Wang And I interviewed a man who spoke to me live on camera, and I can't even begin to say how rare that is. He was putting himself at risk, but he wanted to talk to me. He was totally fine being on camera maskless.

00:07:39
Man Interview Nats

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Selina Wang And he said that all conscientious Chinese people should be out here with us. And he said, I'm not looking for regime change or government change. I just want them to hear our voices. Many of those people, they were holding up white pieces of paper. We've seen that in cities across China. So that really is a symbol against censorship. It's like, you can't arrest me for holding up a white piece of paper. There's nothing on it.

00:08:17
David Rind (host) Are you going to censor a blank sheet?

00:08:19
Selina Wang Yeah. Are you going to censor a blank sheet of paper? It's like I spoke to a protester just the other day and he said to me, it's like a symbol of our generation. It's everything we want to say, but we can't say.

00:08:32
Protestor The white paper. It's everything that we want to say. And you cannot arrest us for just holding a white paper.

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Selina Wang But of course, the government did censor images of people holding white papers. What do you think you guys achieved by participating in that protest?

00:08:49
Protestor If you don't demonstrate. If you don't show them your voice, your idea, they will never know. Silencing will not protect you.

00:09:13

David Rind (host)

So Selina, like you were alluding to before the break, Chinese authorities responded to these protests like we would imagine they'd crack down really, really hard. There were some violent scuffles in some cities. The Internet censors scrubbed any mention of the demonstrations. Police were even seen checking people's cell phones and calling protesters in the days after. But what I find really interesting here is that China experts have been saying, oh, this is much bigger than just a China story like these lockdowns could impact the global economy. And just look at what's happening at the big Foxconn factory there. Can you break that down for me?

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Selina Wang

Yes. So since mid-October, the world's largest iPhone factory in Dunzo, in central China, they've been dealing with absolute chaos.

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Michael Holmes

At the sprawling Foxconn manufacturing plant in China, have been attempting to escape what is a very strict Covid lockdown.

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Selina Wang

After a Covid outbreak, there were viral videos showing workers walking miles by foot on highways, trying to flee the factory because of the total chaotic Covid restrictions there. Then Foxconn went on a hiring spree to try and replace those workers because they need workers ahead of the big holiday season. Right. They need to pump out those iPhones for Apple. So they went on a mass hiring spree, brought in more workers. But the Covid restrictions remained.

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Michael Holmes

What people do not get about Foxconn. It is massive. 300,000 people all crammed together in small rooms and little places and in very crowded workspace. This is not fun.

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Selina Wang

So the workers are living, sleeping and working on site. And they were complaining about pay disputes, the terrible living conditions, unsanitary conditions. And workers had enough. So there was a mass revolt.

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Foxconn workers

Nats workers

00:10:59

Selina Wang

Of workers clashing with police, tearing apart COVID barriers, using COVID barriers as shields.

00:11:08

Foxconn workers

Nats

00:11:11

Selina Wang

Using metal parts from the fence as weapons to hit the police. And there are videos of police brutally hitting and beating the workers as well. It was an absolute mess. As a result, Foxconn was like, okay, we're going to boost pay. We're going to make this situation better. We apologize for the error, but of course, the damage is already done. Analysts estimate that during this chaotic period, Apple was losing \$1,000,000,000 a week in lost iPhone sales. I mean, that's.

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David Rind (host)

So like this. These harsh restrictions are not just a local problem. It can have kind of global impacts on supply chain tech, all that kind of stuff.

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Selina Wang

Yeah, I mean, China's the world's factory floor. This is the world's second largest economy. It is critical when there is a problem in China, it impacts global supply chains. It impacts the global economy. And look, Zero-Covid has definitely made global companies reassess their reliance on China, especially companies like Apple. But China is still critical. And the importance of China in this global network, global supply chain, it's it's not going to go away. But this is definitely a wake up call to big companies to have to say, wait, wait, wait. We rely so heavily on China, a country where at any moment all your operations could go dark. Is that a smart idea?

00:12:37

David Rind (host)

Hmm. So the message from the protesters is, we don't want these Covid tests anymore. We want to be able to move about. So is there a sense that that message is breaking through to the government? Do we know if they're going to ease off on some of these harsh restrictions that have been the source of all this anger?

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Selina Wang

So we've already seen health officials soften their tone with nice phrases like we need to have a more human centered approach to COVID. In Guangzhou, where there have been these major riots, they announced they're lifting lockdowns in some district and that they're no longer requiring district wide mass testing. They have lifted lockdowns in some other areas as well. But for the majority of the population, there's really no change to the policy. And China is kind of stuck between a rock and a hard place because the studies do show that if they were to completely open up, there would be a mass number of deaths because they have not been able to vaccinate enough of the vulnerable elderly population and China's hospital capacity. They don't have enough ICU capacity. Instead of putting their resources into vaccinating the population, getting a more effective mRNA vaccination to the population, instead of boosting that hospital capacity, they put all their resources to mass testing and quarantine and lockdowns. So in reality, this zero Covid, it's it's not going away.

00:14:08

David Rind (host)

Right. So I guess, you know, with that said, what is the reality for people still in China? Is there any kind of effort for people to remove themselves from this situation, find opportunities elsewhere? What have you found on that front?

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Selina Wang

So there is a lot of sentiment among many Chinese people that they want to emigrate. They want to go to a different country. But China has made it really hard for Chinese nationals to leave this country.

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Selina Wang (interview)

Have you told your family where you are.

00:14:44

Man

Nats: speaking Mandarin

00:14:45

Selina Wang

I did speak to one man who went to extreme lengths to get out of this country. He flew from China to South America. From there, he motorcycled. He walked by foot. He bused thousands of miles to the US-Mexico border. You know, he even trekked through the Panama rainforest. And then he did illegally cross the border. He is currently seeking asylum and he's hoping to live his life out in America.

00:15:17

Man

Nats: speaking Mandarin

00:15:22

Selina Wang

He just couldn't take the restrictions, the lockdowns anymore, which, of course, also made it harder for him to make ends meet. And he does still have his children in China, but he's hoping to find some way, any way to bring them to America with him.

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David Rind (host)

Hmm. Well, Selina, thanks very much. Really appreciate it.

00:15:42

Selina Wang

Thanks for having me.

00:15:55

David Rind (host)

One Thing is a production of CNN Audio. This episode was produced by Paola Ortiz and me David Rind. Matt Dempsey is our production manager. Faiz Jamil is our senior producer. Greg Peppers is our supervising producer and Abby Fentress-Swanson is the executive producer of CNN Audio. If you like the show, leave us a rating and a review on Apple Podcasts. It helps other people discover the show. And if you want to be a little more direct with feedback, I'm on social media. Love to hear from you. Thanks for listening. We'll be back next Sunday. Talk to you then.