To the Editor:

To many people, the appalling recent events in China were something that happened primarily in Beijing. It may be little understood just how geographically widespread the democracy movement and its brutal suppression were, and how broad the movement's support was through all segments of Chinese society.

I have just returned from Chengdu, Sichuan Province, where I was personally witness to the viciousness with which army and police proceeded against entirely unarmed demonstrators. The security forces in Chengdu undertook two major actions against the demonstrators, one on the night of Sunday, June 4, the other on the following night of Monday, June 5.

Unlike Beijing, there was little gunfire (although some people were shot); the troops used tear gas and concussion grenades to control the crowds and attacked with truncheons, knives and electric cattle prods. Many people were killed and more wounded. The clear object of the intervention was not simply to control the demonstrators: even after having fallen to the ground, victims continued to be beaten and were stomped on by troops; hospitals were ordered not to accept wounded students (at least in one hospital some employees were arrested for defying the order), and on the second night of the attack the police prevented ambulances from functioning.

Reliable estimates of civilian casualties were difficult to come by but by the time I left on Wednesday, June 7, there was a consensus that from 300 to 400 people had been killed and upward of 1,000 wounded. A doctor from one hospital reported a personal count of 27 deaths in that medical facility. There are several major hospitals in Chengdu and undoubtedly a number of people never made it to any of them.

It is also important to know that among the wounded and dead were not only students but also many others. I was told, but could not confirm independently, that among the victims were children and a woman in her 70's. Conversation with people in the streets during Monday, the day intervening between the two major nighttime assaults, showed that the movement had fundamentally changed from being primarily based on students to one that had extremely broad popular support from people in all walks of life. Words fail to describe the popular outrage not only about the fact of suppression itself but its extreme brutality.

The United States Government has chosen to take a cautiously critical approach to the situation. To those of us who have witnessed the events and who have seen the despair in the eyes of Chinese citizens and heard the grief in their voices, this may fall short of the mark.

In spite of such official caution, it is nevertheless likely, and probably inevitable, that United States-China relations are on a downward spiral. At this time, just as important as official statements and sanctions are our individual actions. I appeal to all with interests in China, academics, private citizens and corporations, to suspend all activities that might be of direct or indirect benefit or interest to the Chinese Government. How could we possibly deal with a Government that murders its unarmed children?

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GRAPHIC: Drawing