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Net raises hopes, and fears, in China

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BEIJING - STRICKEN with severe blood poisoning in her left leg, 12-year-old Chen Dongxiang was facing an anonymous death in a remote southern Chinese village until an amateur photographer arrived and decided to tell her story in an online journal.

Their chance encounter took place two months ago, when food safety inspector Li Guozhong, 49, arrived at Hejian village in southern Hunan province, in search of beautiful scenery to photograph.

What a villager showed him instead was the heart-breaking scene of Dongxiang's putrid left shin bone sticking out from an open wound. Flies buzzed around as blood and pus oozed from it.

She had spent 10 days in the hospital last August, but her family brought her home when the bill reached 18,000 yuan (S\$3,636) and they ran out of money. Dongxiang's father, Mr. Chen Jianjun, lamented that she could now only wait to die.

Shaken by what he saw, Mr. Li took several photos of Dongxiang and launched an online appeal to save her life. A food safety inspector, he said he had highlighted Dongxiang's plight to the local media, to no avail.

But his postings on several online forums began gathering attention, demonstrating quickly the growing power of citizen journalism in China.

A reporter from the official Xinhua news agency suggested to Mr. Li that he set up a blog on daqi.com, popular with those working in the media.

Mr. Li agreed, despite having only a vague notion of what a blog was then. Editors and senior executives at daqi.com gave his blog prominent display on the website.

In the weeks that followed, his website saw at least 58,000 hits as Chinese Internet users offered donations and advice, while others rang government officials, urging them to take action.

Traditional media such as newspapers and television then began to show an interest in the story.

"I never thought the Internet or blogs would have such a huge impact," said Mr. Li in a telephone interview, adding that even he had doubts about whether people would believe the authenticity of his appeal, given the prevalence of scams.

His online appeal has raised over 60,000 yuan to date. Dongxiang was brought to Beijing last month for treatment at the Fengtai Guangji Hospital.

She will need two years of treatment, but the hospital is waiving all charges.

On the flip side of this inspiring tale about citizen journalism in China, however, lies a long list of tricky questions for the Chinese government and its penchant for controlling sensitive information and activities.

While Dongxiang's case did not involve any politics, it highlighted how growing Internet usage and the proliferation of online communication tools, such as blogs, allows ordinary Chinese to bypass the traditional media.

Prominent examples in previous years include last April's anti-Japanese riots, where young Chinese men used online forums, instant messaging software, and SMSes to mobilise crowds for protests.

Before the Chinese government came clean about its initial mishandling of the Sars outbreak in 2003, online forums were also buzzing with rumours and talk of a cover-up.

Beijing knows that it will only have more loopholes to plug in future. China already has more than 123 million 'netizens', second only to the United States' 204 million Internet users.

Aside from investing heavily in technology and manpower to build what is dubbed the 'Great Firewall of China', the government is also looking to strengthen its control of the Internet through tougher regulations.

Last year, it introduced its first major revision of online regulations since 2000, outlawing pornographic and seditious material, as well as online postings that 'encourage illegal gatherings, rallies, protests, and activities which disrupt social order'.

News websites were also told that they can only publish articles written by leading national or provincial-level news organisations. The authorities have made two other announcements on this front recently. On June 29, an official warned that Beijing will step up control over blogs and online search engines 'as more and more illegal and unhealthy information spreads through' these online channels.

About a week later, the western Chongqing municipality embarked on an experiment to register all Internet users, a move which the local government wants to complete by Oct 30.

"I don't think there was any particular trigger for this, other than a desire to keep on top of things as Internet use expands," said Dr Randy Kluver of Texas A&M University in the U.S.

Dr Kluver, whose key research interests include China and the Internet's impact on the country, added: "By making repeated announcements of new efforts, it helps to create a sense of being in control. Many of these announcements are merely gestures to show a sense of control."

Indeed, the sheer scale of the task makes it impossible. Researchers predict that there could be 60 million blogs in China by the end of the year.

Online debate also remains lively despite government controls and Beijing's attempts at intimidating critics with the arrest or censorship of bloggers, or Internet essayists.

When the authorities abruptly sacked Beijing vice-mayor Liu Zhihua last month, for example, Chinese Internet users challenged the official secrecy surrounding the case and demanded greater transparency. "It is hard to convince people by merely using terms such as 'degenerate lifestyle' to summarise (Liu's alleged crimes)," said a commentary posted on people.com.cn, the popular online portal run by the main Communist Party newspaper People's Daily.

"All these (questions) do not just demand deep reflection, but they also need a convincing answer."

For millions of Chinese not yet on the Internet, the challenge lies not in beating government control, but in getting online in the first place.

As for Dongxiang, who is recovering in hospital after doctors cleaned up her wound and put her left leg in a metallic frame, she cannot wait to get a computer and start writing her own online diary.

She said: "I will work hard in my studies so that I can write my own blog some day."