

This is tougher than Abe Lincoln's walk to school

By Tom Phillips, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.06.16

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Children of Atuler village climb the vine ladder on a cliff on their way home in Zhaojue, China. Feature China/Barcroft Images

There is a mountaintop village in China where children must make an incredibly dangerous journey to get to school.

Atuler village is high up in Sichuan province in southwest China. The students, 6 to 15 years old, must climb down an 800-meter cliff (2,600 feet) to get to their school. During their journey, they scramble down old, rickety ladders and climb over bare rocks.

A Chinese newspaper printed pictures of their 90-minute climb. The story immediately went viral. Chinese officials have promised to help the isolated mountain village.

The photographs were taken by Chen Jie, an award-winning Beijing News photographer. Beijing is the capital of China.

Shocking First Reaction

Chen described the moment he first saw the village's 15 schoolchildren climbing the cliff. "There is no doubt I was shocked by the scene I saw in front of me," he wrote. Chen added that he hoped his photographs could help bring change to the village.

Chen spent three days visiting Atuler and said the climb was only for the brave. "It is very dangerous. You have to be 100 percent careful," he said. "If you have any kind of accident, you will fall."

The climb was so steep that news reporter Zhang Li burst into tears as she attempted to reach Atuler village. She works for a Chinese TV station. "Do we have to go this way?" she asked as her team carefully made its way up the cliff. "I don't want to go."

School On Top Is Out

Api Jiti is the head of the 72-family farming village that grows peppers and walnuts. He told Beijing News there was not enough room on top of the mountain to build a school for the local children.

The danger was clear. The village chief said that seven or eight villagers had died, and many more had been injured after losing their grip. He had once nearly fallen from the mountain himself.

The trek to school is now considered to be so bad that some children stay with families near the school. They only return home to the mountaintop to see their own families twice a month.

Villager Chen Jigu said that the wooden ladders that are used to go up and down the mountain are hundreds of years old. "We replace a ladder with a new one when we find one of them is rotten," he said.

Living On A Dollar A Day

In the Chinese countryside, many people are very poor. In Atuler, some people might live on less than \$1 a day.

President Xi Jinping has vowed to completely end poverty by 2020. He said he would help about 70 million mostly rural people who live on less than \$350 per year.

Experts say Xi is not counting the large group of poor people living in Chinese cities. Dorothy Solinger is an expert on poverty at the University of California, Irvine. She said she believed there could be as many as 40 million poor people still living in China's cities. The government gives them some money but is "not helping them escape poverty."

After Chen's pictures went viral, the Chinese government promised action. The region's top official said the government would build a steel staircase to connect the village with the outside world. In the meantime, it will try to find a permanent solution.

What's The Next Step For Villagers?

Jike Jinsong, another official, said there was not enough money to build a road to Atuler. He warned that the government could not move the community to another location. The villagers would lose their land.

A third official has suggested turning the area into a tourist spot.

Photographer Chen said it was important to help the villagers, who do not have much money and eat whatever they grow.

"They are very poor. They have nothing but bare walls around them. You can see two or three beds in each home but no furniture," he said.

Chen added, "How is it possible that something like this exists in the modern world?"