

屍橫遍野

shi1 heng2 bian4 ye3

Tens of thousands of fish died at farms in Sam Mun Tsai in Tai Po, believed to be the victims of unseasonal warm weather that wreaked havoc with marine ecology. Dead fish covering the sea were described as “屍橫遍野” (*shi1 heng2 bian4 ye3*).

“屍” (*shi1*) is “corpse,” “橫” (*heng2*) “horizontal,” “across,” “遍” (*bian4*) “all over” and “野” (*ye3*) “a field,” “countryside.” Literally, “屍橫遍野” (*shi1 heng2 bian4 ye3*) is “corpses all over the field,” which means “a field littered with corpses.”

The idiom is used to describe the tragic aftermath of war. Soldiers are killed by the thousands, there is no time to bury them, and the result is a field full of bodies.

The idiom is also used to describe heavy casualties of a natural disaster. When a lot of people are killed in an earthquake and their bodies are seen lying everywhere, it is “屍橫遍野” (*shi1 heng2 bian4 ye3*).

Idiom by Lon Yan

Figuratively, the idiom means heavy casualties, and not necessarily of the fatal kind.

When a company downsizes and fires half of its 1,000-member workforce, we can say the sackings have resulted in “屍橫遍野” (*shi1 heng2 bian4 ye3*).

Those who have lost their jobs are the “屍” (*shi1*) – corpses – in the sense that they have become the casualties of the company’s action, even though they did not actually die.

When we use the idiom, there must be a lot of victims. When a company only fires three people, we cannot call it “屍橫遍野.”

Terms containing the character “屍” (*shi1*) include:

屍體 (*shi1 ti3*) – corpse, dead body

驗屍 (*yan4 shi1*) – perform autopsy

毀屍滅跡 (*hui3 shi1 mie4 ji4*) – chop up corpse and obliterate traces

僵屍 (*jiang1 shi1*) – a vampire