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A winter of darkness for religions in China

AsiaNews.it (11.12.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1Mf4U0o> - The Ministry of Religious Affairs (more precisely: the State Administration for Religious Affairs, SARA), has announced on its website that it is preparing a national summit on religions, which will discuss the revision of norms governing the control of faiths. Many Christians interviewed by AsiaNews fear that this will only further plunge the life of communities into darkness as they struggle against a swelling tide of increasingly severe restrictions.

SARA deputy director, Chen Zhongrong, said that the summit will discuss the "intensive" formation of local religious leaders. Moreover, President Xi Jinping is set to attend the meeting.

The date has not yet been officially announced; some say that it will happen later this year. However, preparatory meetings have been taking place for some time now. So far this year, Yu Zhengsheng, Politburo member and previously Xi Jinping's successor as Shanghai party secretary, has made several visits to representatives of the five official religions (Buddhism, Islam, Taoism, Protestant, Catholic).

In January, he traveled to Baoding, where there is a strong presence of the unofficial Catholic community. He also chaired a meeting of the Commission for Religious Affairs of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

Sequestered property and Internet

What is far from clear is the topics of the summit. In an interview with Wenweipo (a pro-Beijing newspaper in Hong Kong), SARA's director, Wang Zuoan, said that the time is now ripe for a comprehensive review of the norms governing religions and that agenda topics would include property rights and the use of internet.

The issue of property rights is the source of a bitter dispute between the different religious communities and SARA. Many properties - buildings, hospitals, schools, land - expropriated under Mao Zedong to be used "for the people", under a law passed by Deng Xiaoping should have been returned to their respective owners. Instead, SARA members and offices liberally use these properties for their own purposes, even registering them as personal property. According to Chinese law, property to the value of an estimated 13 billion euros should be restored to the Catholic Church.

Over the years the government has expropriated houses to build hotels and buildings at the time of the Olympics and seized farmland and villages to grant to the land for industrial use. The complaints of the injured parties have never been upheld. Church environments fear that the new regulations could simply 'clean the slate' of any claims heretofore made by bishops and communities.

There is also a fear that restrictions on the use of Internet will be increased, mirroring what is already taking place throughout Chinese society in recent months as is seen in the arrest and conviction of dozens of bloggers and journalists. These include Gao Yu, guilty of having published a list of everything that has been prohibited on the internet in the name of "security".

Among Catholics, there are those who suspect that the death of Fr. Wei (Yu) Heping, who was very active on the internet, is due to a conflict with the authorities, even though they continue to say that the priest "committed suicide".

"Sinofication" a form of repression

So far Xi Jinping has hardly ever spoken of religions, but in May he met with the United Front (the representatives of all social organizations outside the Communist Party). In his speech he insisted on the "sinofication" of religions and that they must strengthen their independence from foreign influence. In short, he said, this is the only way they will survive in China.

As for the Catholics, if this "sinofication" means inculturation, namely an entering into dialogue with Chinese culture, then this has been happening since the time of Matteo Ricci and his followers, such as Paul Xu Guangxi (1562-1633), a national hero and scientist, as well as great Catholic. The "sinofication" had a positive outcome and led to the first Vatican delegate in China, the great Celso Costantini (1876-1958) who pushed for the ordination of the first Chinese bishops. He proposed a curriculum in seminaries that integrated theology with traditional culture. He also suggested construction of churches that were more responsive to the architectural style prevalent at the time in the Empire.

Unfortunately, the "sinofication" referred to by Xi seems somewhat different. Last May 29, the United Front website published an explanation of the term used by Xi Jinping. It says that the term is first of political, namely to support the government of the Chinese Communist Party and socialism and obey the laws of the State. Secondly, it is

nationalistic, meaning that religions must act in the best interests of the Chinese nation and the Chinese people. Thirdly, it is ideological in so far as religious activities must be guided by socialist values and be imbued with traditional Chinese values. The Bible must be interpreted so as to promote what is good for social development.

The scope of this type of "sinofication" is even clearer in light of the statements published in the China Nation Post on April 21. The text underlines that in order to become more "Chinese" Christianity must try to be useful to the society into which it is inserted. It must give up its claims to "superiority" and not be exclusivist, rather it must coexist with other religions. It must interpret Sacred Scriptures in the light of traditional Chinese culture. The newspaper warns that if this adaptation to becoming Chinese – this "sinofication" - does not take place, the foreign religion cannot survive and will be erased.

Agreement can be reached on some aspects of this "sinofication": the witness of Christians always bring "benefits" to society. The Chinese Church has long been at the service of families, the poor, immigrants, the handicapped, the sick. In the same way it has long been committed to the dialogue between Chinese faith and culture.

The problem arises when this inculturation is not part of the Christian identity but imposed from the outside, according to a measure established by the political power. In this case - as several Chinese Christian intellectuals point out - there is the risk of reducing the Christian faith to a by-product of socialist doctrine, transforming churches into charitable organizations or NGOs, while pastors and leaders become simple bureaucrats in the Party. Apparatus

In fact, this "sinofication" mask an attempted power grab on religions. On November 30, in an article published by the "Global Times", Zhu Weiqun, president of the Committee for Ethnic and Religious Affairs of the CPCP said that reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism is a matter for the Communist Party and that Beijing will determine who will succeed the Dalai Lama.

In January, new rules were introduced for Muslims in Xinjiang, banning women from wearing the burqa and young people from growing a beard. Often universities rectorors forcibly ban students from fasting during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Last year Christmas Parties and Christmas ceremonies were banned from universities and schools. While in Zhejiang thousands of crosses were torn down from bell towers and churches so as not ruin the skyline of capital-communist modernity with Chinese characteristics.

The Party and the China-Vatican dialogue

The Party's drive to have total and absolute dominion over religions is also evident from the themes of the dialogue between the Vatican and China. From information that has arrived from China it would seem that Beijing's proposal is limited to complete recognition by the Holy See for all official bishops (even illegitimate and excommunicated bishops), without any mention of the unofficial bishops and those in prison; Vatican approval of the government recognized Council of Bishops, which excludes underground bishops; approval of the competency of this Council (and not the Pope) in the appointment of new candidates to the episcopacy who will be "democratically" elected (in short according to the suggestions of the Patriotic Association). The Holy See must approve the Council's appointment and has a weak veto only in "severe" cases, which must be justified if used. If the Holy See's justifications are considered "insufficient", the Council of Bishops may decide to proceed anyway.

The Vatican's requests for the liberation of imprisoned bishops and the recognition of underground bishops have been completely ignored. A few days after the meeting between the Holy See and the Chinese delegations in Beijing last October (October 11-16), official Catholic bishops and leaders in the provinces of Guizhou and Shandong officers were made attend a study session on the "sinofication of religions and Christianity," in which the above criteria and control over episcopal ordinations were reiterated.

Obviously, you need a large dose of humor to call this respect for religious freedom. In fact we see a widespread penetration of ideology and of party control in the most intimate depths of faith, dogmas, beliefs, to disfigure the face of the religion, leaving only an empty shell, a puppet in the Party's hands.

Moreover, it is now clear to many that the sinofication, the new regulations, the increased controls have only one purpose: to preserve the monopoly of power of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and remove or crush any person who might challenge it or its very existence.

The syndrome of a "USSR style collapse"

For years, the CPC has been suffering from a syndrome of "the Soviet style collapse", for fear of ending up like the Communist Party in Russia. Xi Jinping has often spoke about this, warning against any "revisionism" and any criticism of the Party's history.

China has always looked with fear upon the end of the Soviet empire. In 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell, the CPC blamed the collapse on Solidarnosc, Poland and Pope John Paul II. And so since then Beijing has reinforced repression against free trade unions, against attempts of regional autonomy, against the Catholic religion and religions in general.

After the Tiananmen massacre, the CPC tried to justify its use of force by granting economic well-being to society. But the world that has emerged is full of huge economic imbalances, pollution, injustice, violence, corruption and now the support of the population has shrunk. For this is an ongoing struggle against any person who would throw a shadow on the power of the Party intellectuals, bloggers, journalists, lawyers, human rights and ... religions.

The fear of religious communities is even more acute because adhesion to a faith has even penetrated Party members, so much so that a few months ago a ban on members practicing any form of religion was issued.

Conversions and return to the practice of the faith is spreading like "weeds" in Chinese society to the point of quietly overturning government statistics. In fact, according to Beijing there are only 100 million faithful belonging to the five official religions in China. But already in 2007 some professors at the Shanghai Normal University published a survey in China Daily which showed that the number of believers is around 300 million and more.

The real tragedy in all of this, is that in addition to its obsessive fear of a "USSR style collapse", Beijing is also suffering from a "suicidal" tendency, given that in its attempt to eliminate or stifle religions - and in particular the Christian communities - the Party is in reality erasing the only means by which it could give real meaning and cohesion to the Chinese society, which is currently prostrated by decades of materialism, individualism, suspicion, conflict and existential emptiness.

European Union raises human rights issues in Tibet with China

The Tibet Post (5.12.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1Y4xbO4> - The European Union raised with China the issue of human rights in Tibet during the 34th round of the EU-China Dialogue on Human Rights. The EU-China Dialogue on Human Rights in Beijing, on 30 November and 1 December 2015.

"Both sides consider human rights to be an important part of their bilateral relations, as recognised in the Joint Statement adopted during the 2015 EU-China Summit," said a press statement released on December 2, 2015, by the EU delegation following the meetings.

The Summit "celebrated the 40th anniversary of EU-China diplomatic relations. For the past 20 years, human rights dialogues have provided an opportunity for the EU and China to engage in in-depth discussions on human rights," the EU statement said, adding that the "dialogue allowed the two sides to have a detailed exchange of views on a wide range of human rights issues."

'The EU raised, in particular, concerns about recent developments in China, such as pending legislation on national security issues and the right to adequate housing and reform of the Hukou system,' it added.

The EU also raised "the rights of persons belonging to minorities, especially in Tibet and Xinjiang, freedom of religion or belief, off-line and on-line freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, the due process of law, arbitrary detention, torture and the death penalty."

It said that the "EU also articulated its concern at the ongoing detention of a number of human rights lawyers and activists who were arrested in July and August 2015. "

"Furthermore, some 20 individual cases were raised in the context of the discussion about China's human rights situation to illustrate EU concerns, including those of Liu Xiaobo, Ilham Tohti, Hada, Pu Zhiqiang, Xu Zhiyong, Gao Zhisheng, Wang Yu and her son, Bao Zhuoxuan," said the statement.

The exchange about recent developments in the European Union began with an introduction on the 2014 European Commission report on the implementation of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The EU delegation said that "the Chinese side raised the issues of migrants' protection, xenophobia and religious discrimination in the EU. Cooperation in international fora and the implementation of recommendations from international bodies, in particular those made during China's recent review by the Committee Against Torture, were also raised."

"Two further issues specific to this dialogue were discussed, namely the social integration of migrant workers in China and refugees and asylum-seekers in Europe and, secondly, environmental protection and human rights, with a special emphasis on the role of civil society organisations, the importance of freedom of expression and unimpeded access to information," the statement added.

Beijing also claimed that China "asked the EU side to fully and objectively look at China's achievements in human rights and conduct human rights exchanges with China on the basis of equality and mutual respect."

The delegation of the European Union was led by Mr Ugo Astuto, Acting Managing Director for Asia and the Pacific in the European External Action Service.

The Chinese delegation was led by Mr Li Junhua, Director-General for International Organisations and Conferences, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China.

Just a few days after the dialogue in Beijing, Chinese authorities have jailed two Tibetan monks from Kirti monastery in Ngaba County of Tibet, for staging peaceful protests, both of which involved raising the banned portrait of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

A court in Sichuan province sentenced Gedhun Phuntsok, 18, to four years in prison, while Lobsang Kalsang, 19, to three years and six months after it convicted them for peaceful protests against the Chinese regime in March this year.

In March 2008, Tibet witnessed peaceful demonstrations in Tibetan capital Lhasa, which broke out in widespread protests all over Tibet- its biggest protest in 20 years. China responded to the unrest with a deadly military crackdown.

Human rights activists say China tramples on religious freedom and culture in Tibet, which it has ruled with an iron fist since Chinese troops invaded the region in 1949. The regime recently imposed severe restrictions on internet and phone connections throughout Tibet in a greater attempt to prevent information reaching the outside world.

How religion is unofficially influencing China

In the Xi Jinping era, China's position on religion is being changed at an informal, grassroots level

Policyforum.net (12.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1SX9dmG> - While China has undergone a number of changes since entering the Xi Jinping era, its position on religion has remained relatively unchanged, although evidence suggests that policy is being changed at an informal, grassroots level.

Xi has been preoccupied with taking down the "big tigers" in his party to consolidate his power and has not had time to evaluate religion closely. Although a number of high profile issues intertwined with religion are beginning to pose some difficult questions, Xi has maintained the status quo by not rocking the boat – for now.

Even though the West generally views China as a country without religious freedom, the reality is that China has "religious freedom" in its constitution, although that freedom only extends to the five legal religions – Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Islam. But, as with most things in China, the religious landscape on what is permissible is constantly shifting and it has become essential for religious practitioners to be able to navigate change. For example, Falun Gong was permissible until Beijing deemed it to be a destabilising factor.

China is extremely protective of its religious sector and notorious for being indifferent to international pressures, which is understandable given religiously motivated movements of the masses have historically threatened (e.g. Taiping Rebellion) and even toppled (e.g. Red Turban Rebellion) Chinese dynasties.

It is unlikely in the near future that official foreign partnerships, such as that between the Vatican and China, would come to fruition. Nonetheless, China recognises some benefits in importing foreign religious influences and there is an informal, alternative stream

returning to the country from the Chinese diaspora, which the Chinese state sometimes permits.

The Chinese diaspora is arguably the largest in the world both in terms of spread and sheer numbers. Members are well positioned to serve as critical cultural brokers in developed countries. For example, in a recent study I found that Chinese officials are more trusting towards fellow Chinese over non-Chinese in matters of religion. A major reason is diaspora members are better equipped (e.g. language, sociocultural norms, socioeconomic status) to navigate China's complex and shifting socio-political landscape and do not carry the post-colonial burdens that their white counterparts do.

Diaspora Christian communities are actively and covertly exporting Christian ideas and practices to China. Because they usually partner with local Chinese state-approved agents, they end up influencing religious policies. Recently, I observed a team of Chinese-Canadians running an English summer camp at a government-sanctioned church in a village in Central China. A high-ranking official from the province's Religious Affairs Bureau became suspicious of the activity and came with his wife to observe the camp.

The Chinese-Canadian team observed the ground rules of not proselytizing, but carried on teaching English supported by games and singing children's hymns like Father Abraham with modified lyrics. The Chinese-Canadian team leader told me that the main goal was capacity-building for the local church so that they can run their own camps to serve their community in the future. Over the week of interacting with the Chinese-Canadians and local Protestant clergy, the official became convinced this team was safe to partner with, and even drove some members to the airport for their flight back to Canada. There are now discussions on how this team can expand their operations under the aegis of the provincial government.

From China's perspective, there are many benefits in regulating foreign religious influences. First, given China's rapid economic growth, Xi has stated the necessity of improving the moral condition of the country and religion is a key arbiter of ethical values.

Second, it makes no sense to reject free human and material resources that benefit places that have not boomed economically like the upper-tier coastal cities have, and these resources are especially welcome in rural regions with scant social services. Diaspora religious communities not only offer religion, but also qualified professionals with credentials from the West such as doctors, engineers, teachers, and lawyers.

Third, having the diaspora agents cooperate with the local state agents makes them easier to observe and regulate. Some diaspora organisations have even been redeployed by the state, going from running summer camps to helping build hospitals.

Fourth, China needs overseas expertise on religion, especially Protestant and Catholic. In fact, importing overseas theological training fills a dire need – to prevent house churches radicalising into cults, and consequent destabilisation (e.g. Eastern Lightning).

Specifically, this allows the state to support religious teachings aligned with its agenda, and to allow for representatives from the overseas communities to educate the house church members, whose leaders can struggle to receive formal training from government-sanctioned seminaries.

Finally, should any of these transnational associations not work out, it allows the state to remain free from any consequences since the partnership was covert to begin with.

China's religious policy in the foreseeable future is to maintain flexibility. As many things are in China, what is written may not be what is practiced. The state recognises that it is

impossible for its domestic religious communities to be religiously sequestered from the rest of the world in the face of rapid globalisation. Even though official religious channels are closed, religious ideas and practices can still be imported covertly as long as one plays by China's unwritten rules.

Domestically, Hong Kong already serves as a middle ground – a launching pad for overseas and local religious agents to enter the Mainland and also a place for Mainland Chinese to receive theological training free from government censorship. Furthermore, Taiwan and Singapore's religious communities are eyeing the religious market within China as political ties are improving. By strategically partnering and regulating religious communities from the diaspora, China gets plenty of opportunities to assess the credibility and trustworthiness of potential partners.

By no means are all religions in China on an equal footing. China supports the indigenous religions, Buddhism and Daoism, while Catholicism and Protestantism are treated with scepticism, and Islam has it the worst with China's systemic discrimination. While it may be a stretch to extrapolate the Christian case above to other legal religions, all five major religions nonetheless have potential partners abroad.

There's an undercurrent of change through transnational linkages that is going largely unnoticed, but if it hits key figures, such as the aforementioned official, it can cause significant ripples in the Chinese religious policy landscape. To quote from one of my interviews with a diaspora religious leader, "The Chinese government is just like an old traditional Chinese father. If you save his face, he will let you do whatever you like. So just don't make him lose face and publicly embarrass him."

Chinese underground priest found dead

Father Pedro Yu Heping formerly ran a popular Catholic news site shut down by authorities

UCAnews.com (24.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1N5BjqW> - An underground priest who once operated a website that ran afoul of Chinese authorities has died under mysterious circumstances.

On Nov. 11, police informed the family of Father Pedro Yu Heping, also known as Wei Heping, that the priest's body had been found in the Fen River, a tributary of the Yellow River that flows through Shanxi province.

Father Yu's body was found on Nov. 8, when the priest was supposed to be arriving in Xingcheng in northeastern Liaoning province the previous day.

Church leaders from different parts of China and faithful who were close to the priest have gathered in Taiyuan, Shanxi's provincial capital, where his body was found, hoping to get more information.

"Two nuns saw Father Yu off for a bus to the train station in Taiyuan on Nov. 6," said a source, who asked to remain anonymous. "Various church members were still able to talk to him over the phone that day."

Father Yu was expected to appear in Xingcheng in the afternoon of Nov. 7 to join a catechetical meeting, but he did not show up. Earlier in the day, a nun received a text message from Father Yu's mobile phone. The message contained only one Chinese character — bie, which could be interpreted to mean "farewell" — the source said.

"No one believed Father Yu, as a dedicated priest, would commit suicide," the source stressed. "But now even a postmortem is not trustworthy."

Father Yu, 40, was the first webmaster of Tianzhujiào Zaixian, a popular Catholic web portal established in early 2000. Because of the time difference between Europe and Asia, he and his team could translate news from the Vatican in a timely manner, leading the unregistered website to become very popular among Chinese Catholics.

However, the website's popularity drew attention from Chinese authorities and it was subsequently shut down. Father Yu claimed he was no longer involved with the website after it reopened in 2003.

Father Yu was born in Shanxi. He studied at Baoding Seminary of the Chinese Catholic underground community in Hebei province from 1993 until 1997. He was ordained a priest of Ningxia diocese in 2004.

He furthered his studies at the Pontifical Bolivarian University in Columbia and at the the Pontifical University of Salamanca in Spain. After earning master's degrees in church social teachings in 2006 and in canon law in 2007, he returned and taught in various seminaries in China.

In recent years, Father Yu was active in publishing a theological journal and conducting research at several cultural institutes in China. He also brought young Catholics to preach and serve in remote areas.

Miss Canada World denied entry to pageant in China

BBC News, Washington (20.11.2015) - <http://wapo.st/1T9I2W7> - **Anastasia Lin, the winner of Miss World Canada, says that she has been denied the right to compete in this year's Miss World competition because she has spoken out about Chinese human rights abuses.**

The 25-year-old Chinese-born actress did not receive an invitation letter from the Chinese government that would allow her to take part in the Miss World competition this December in Sanya, China.

Without the letter Lin is unable to apply for a visa, and because the opening ceremony is on 23 November, the opportunity to compete is fading fast. The deadline to receive the letter came and went on Friday.

"Miss World's official line is that if I don't make it to the opening ceremony, I probably can't enter this year. If I'm a few days late it might be OK, but the window is closing. At this point I don't want to give up," Lin told the BBC.

Other contestants received their letters at the end of October.

Since winning the crown in May, Lin was praised by many for her outspoken opposition to China's record of human rights violations. She has particularly focused on defending Falun Gong, a spiritual group that the Chinese government regards as a cult.

Chinese law allows for the arrest of anyone suspected of supporting religious movements that aren't approved by the state.

Lin's moved from China to Canada in 2003. Her interest in human rights began when she heard the stories of other Chinese citizens who said they were targeted by the government.

She has since performed in films about the abuse of Falun Gong members and spoken about the subject to a US Congressional committee in July.

Ike Lalji, chief executive of Miss World Canada, has said that **Canada won't send a runner-up** to China if Lin is unable to attend as it would be too late since training starts on Saturday

Lin says that she has spoken to former Chinese Miss World contestants who agree with her stance on China's human rights policies, but didn't want to speak out for fear of risking their own ability to get a visa.

"I'm not speaking without fear, as I've seen the repercussions," Lin says.

After she won the competition earlier this year, Lin's father was contacted by Chinese security forces. They threatened that there would be consequences if Lin continued to speak out. As her father still lives in China, Lin is concerned.

"Dad's really scared. He doesn't really dare to talk to me as he worries his phone is tapped. He doesn't speak his mind anymore."

However, she wants to use her position with Miss World to highlight the issue and defend the Chinese people's right to free speech.

"I'm alone and don't even have any family around me, so it's very difficult. Miss World is an international organisation, and if organisations like this don't speak up against the bullying of their own contestants it will continue. China knows it works and they'll just use it again and again until someone stands up to them."

Regardless of whether Lin gains the right to compete or not, she has said that she will use her position to speak out for human rights. After failing to receive papers on Friday, she is considering a petition to protest against the decision.

"If I'm able to go to China, I want the people to see me. They already know about me and my story as they can go around the firewall. I want them to see I've been true to my conscience, and that they can do it too."

The BBC approached Miss World Canada and the Chinese Consulates in Toronto and Ottawa for a comment but did not receive a response.

Voice of America: China arrests four after public prayer service

ChinaAid.org (28.10.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1WKzU3V> - Police in China have arrested four members of an underground church after they gathered in Beijing to worship in public and request the return of their church property.

Sources tell VOA the four members of the Shouwang Church have been sentenced to 10 days of administrative detention after being arrested Sunday for "disturbing public order."

Authorities in the Chinese capital have not offered comment on the arrests.

According to the overseas religious rights group China Aid, the Shouwang Church has long been harassed by the government.

The church lost its indoor meeting place in 2011 when its landlord prematurely terminated their lease under government pressure.

Since then, church members have been forced to worship outdoors in the nearby neighborhood, but are often harassed, ordered by police to disperse, or even sometimes arrested. The church's pastor and founder, Jin Tianming, is under house arrest.

Xu Yonghai, the pastor of the underground Divine Love Fellowship Christian Church in Beijing, told VOA Thursday that Chinese authorities have intensified pressure on house churches.

"The Beijing Shouwang Church is relatively large. It has more than 1,000 members. They are forced to worship outside, in public. Each time, people are arrested. It is said the police used to take them to the police station and release them, now they are held in detention," he said.

The so-called "house churches" or "family churches" refer to churches organized by Chinese without government approval. Because they often have no place of worship, members often hold meetings in private homes, hence the name "house churches."

Pastor Xu said even official churches that are approved by the government are being suppressed.

"Since last year, the local government in China's southern Zhejiang Province has ordered churches to remove crosses from church buildings, most of them are official churches. We don't understand why it is happening. It doesn't make sense. Official churches are under the leadership of the communist party. Many of the church leaders are members of the communist party. Why suppress even them?"

According to China Aid, the religious rights group, more than 1,500 crosses in Zhejiang Province have either been demolished or removed against church protests. In the process, some church members and their lawyers have been arrested.

The local government accuses the churches of illegal construction and says they are requiring them to demolish their crosses to comply with building codes.

Upcoming reconsideration trial for house church pastor sentenced to four years in prison

China Aid (13.10.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1LPSMJv> - A house church pastor in China's coastal Shandong, arrested June 2014 and sentenced to four years in prison in May, filed an administrative reconsideration suit.

More than 30 municipal police officers detained Zhao Weiliang and 22 other church members during a raid on a church choir practice on June 25, 2014. While many of those detained were released quickly, Zhao and two others, Chen Jiangang and Wang Aimei, were detained until May 2015, at which point Wang was released. However, Zhao and Chen were found guilty of "using a cult to undermine law enforcement" and sentenced to four and three years in prison, respectively. Police claimed that Chen and Zhao were

members of the Total Scope Church, also known as the Born Again Movement, which the Chinese government recognizes as a cult.

Regarding Zhao's upcoming reconsideration trial, his wife Liu Cuiping said, "An acquittal is impossible. That would show how ridiculous the original sentence was. Instead, it will be good if his sentence is reduced to one year."

Liu said that the court gave her husband a stricter punishment because he had a criminal record, having previously been sentenced to administrative detention in 2006 for "disturbing social order" and sentenced to 1-1/2 years in a labor camp in 2009 for so-called "cult activity."

"This time we hired a lawyer and fully understood legal regulations. The false label of 'cult members' can finally be taken off," Liu said of the most recent arrest and trial.

Liu told a China Aid reporter that without Zhao, who was previously the family's only source of income, she and her two children are being supported through church offerings and help from relatives.

The detention center where Zhao is being held does not allow visitors. Liu said she has not seen her husband since his trial in May but does not believe he is being mistreated.

Official raid pressures Hubei house church to join TSPM

China Aid (12.10.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1VTU59G> - Members of the religious affairs bureau and Three-Self Patriotic Movement raided a 70-member house church in China's central Hubei province on Oct. 4 and threatened to close the gathering place if the Christians did not join a government-sanctioned church.

The raid on Jinshuixia Church in Wuhan, Hubei, on Oct. 4 is the second such attack this year. The church was previously raided on Aug. 16, and both events involved pressure to register with the Three-Self church and threats that the church would be closed if it did not comply. There were forty church members in attendance at the time of the August raid.

Jinshuixia Church's pastor, Li Yongguang, was gone on a business trip at the time of the most recent raid. A church member surnamed Zhou told China Aid's reporter Qiao Nong that there were four officials from the religious affairs bureau. "One was a liaison officer, one was an office chief, and the two others I did not know. They said our church needed a certificate—needed to register. If we didn't get a certificate, our church would be closed down. They said they would arrest me if I did not listen to them. I told them I had committed no crime."

Xinjiang house churches raided

China Aid (18.09.2015) - <http://www.chinaaid.org/2015/09/xinjiang-house-churches-raided.html> - Members of a house church in China's far western Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region recently submitted a request for administrative reconsideration to local authorities after officials raided a church gathering and detained Christians in March. Additionally, China Aid learned of another house church in the area that was raided earlier this year.

Trouble began in early March when Tao Wenju and Dai Wanying organized a church gathering for March 2-4 at Dai's home in Wujiaqu, Xinjiang. By the last day, approximately 90 Christians were gathered at Dai's home when Wujiaqu police raided the meeting. Several church members were administratively detained for 12 days.

A lawyer representing the church members said that four Christians had served administrative detentions: Tao Wenju, Dai Wanying and Ren Yuxing and his wife.

The local ethnic and religious affairs bureau later called the gathering an "illegal underground religious activity." (Editor's note: Wujiaqu is under the administration of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps [XPCC], and local officials and organizations fall under the administration of the XPCC rather than that of the regional government.)

Following their release, the Christians filed an administrative reconsideration with the local police, asking the police to repeal their decision to punish the church.

According to a church member, the punishment was repealed because part of the initial decision contained a procedural mistake. "After the punishment was repealed, the police once again issued a decision notice with administrative punishment," the Christian said. "The punishment in the second statement was basically the same as the first punishment. At first, they made an illegal mistake in their procedure, but now they've corrected the procedural mistake."

After the punishment was reissued, church members said they would file an administrative lawsuit.

China Aid also learned of another case that occurred in May 2015. When more than 20 members of another church in Wujiaqu gathered for a meeting, police raided the meeting, took the Christians back to the police station and strip-searched them.

"It is a rural church and has around 20 members," a lawyer said. "While they were meeting, they were all brought [to the police station, where] their bodies were searched.... They planned to sue the police, but it [never] amounted to anything."

Released Zhejiang pastor taken into custody less than 2 months after completion of prison sentence

China Aid (17.09.2015) - <http://www.chinaaid.org/2015/09/released-zhejiang-pastor-taken-into.html> - Local police in China's eastern Zhejiang took Huang Yizi, pastor of Fengwo Church, into custody a second time on Sept. 12 for unknown charges. Huang was released from jail last month, following the completion of a one-year prison sentence.

Huang was at home when police came and took him away. According to a member of Fengwo Church, "At that time, he was ... with his two children. His wife had already been out for a few days. Now, the two children are at home in the police's care."

Huang's first detainment occurred on Aug. 2, 2014—12 days after he and other Christians organized a protest against the demolition of Salvation Church's cross in the town of Shuitou, Pingyang County. Originally, he was charged with "gathering a crowd to assault a state agency," but the charge was changed.

After his March 2015 sentencing hearing, Huang's lawyer Zhang Kai said " ... the entire trial violated procedures. Outside the court, there were almost 1,000 people, but the trial was conducted in a small court that could only seat 40 people. The court issued six

visitor passes to the client, which violates the basic legal principle that the trial should be public. During the trial, police conducted investigations outside the court, which also violates the law. The judge refused to accept the evidence the defense presented, and other times, he wouldn't even allow us to present specific evidence. We provided video footage from the incident on July 21, 2014, but the judge refused to allow us to play the video."

The judge administered a one-year prison sentence, which was completed on Aug. 1. Subsequently, Huang was freed and allowed to return home.

Following his release, Huang penned a letter in which he thanked God for his "one year sabbatical in prison" and described the details of his life behind bars. While he joyously noted the many prisoners who converted to Christianity after meeting him, he also stated that he was interrogated 100 times, with each session lasting between one to 6-1/2 hours.

Currently, the length of time officials intend to keep Huang in custody remains unknown.

China releases Korean-American missionary: lawyer

Reuters (07.09.2015) - <http://reut.rs/1NfXjVQ> - China has released a Korean-American missionary arrested last year over a non-profit school he ran near the border with North Korea, his lawyer said, resolving a case that sparked outcry from international Christian groups.

A crackdown has forced hundreds of Christian missionaries out of China, most by having their visas refused, sources told Reuters last year.

Supporters of Korean-American missionary Peter Hahn had said authorities targeted him because of his Christian faith and because of the small vocational school he ran.

His release comes ahead of a visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to the United States in late September, during which a draft Chinese law governing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is expected to be a point of contention.

Hahn's lawyer, Zhang Peihong, said his client, who has diabetes and has suffered strokes, was in stable health and recovering in the South Korean capital, Seoul, after Chinese authorities released him on Aug. 17.

"It's not that he has been freed (early). He was sentenced to nine months and those nine months have been served," Zhang said.

Zhang told Reuters in July that authorities had dropped three of the four charges against Hahn, 74, probably for lack of evidence, leaving only the least serious charge of counterfeiting receipts.

Western governments and foreign non-profit groups are pressuring China to revise the proposed NGO law, which they say would severely restrict the activities of aid and business groups and universities.

The law, which was opened for public consultation in May, would require foreign non-profit groups to find an official sponsor, typically a government-backed agency, and gives broad latitude to the police to regulate activities and funding.

Hahn's school in the border town of Tumen was shut down after an investigation last year that lasted months. He was formally arrested in December after months under house arrest, and was tried in Yanbian prefecture, near the North Korean border.

Last year, a Canadian Christian couple who worked with North Korean refugees and ran a coffee shop in Dandong on the Chinese border were accused of espionage by the Chinese government.

Chinese Catholics appeal for release of long-imprisoned bishop

UCAnews.com (01.09.2015) - <http://www.ucanews.com/news/chinese-catholics-appeal-for-release-of-long-imprisoned-bishop/74182> - Chinese Catholics in Hebei province have repeated an appeal for the release of long-imprisoned underground Bishop James Su Zhimin of Baoding.

The request came after Chinese President Xi Jinping granted amnesty on Aug. 29 to jailed war veterans and bedridden or disabled elderly prisoners to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II.

"Though we do not know his health condition, it is imaginable that an elderly man in his 80s must be ailing like a candle in the wind. Detaining [the bishop] for 18 years, by now his leadership, his organizing ability and influence in the Church have already diminished," the petitioners wrote in a letter to Baoding's United Front Work Department, the Communist Party department that oversees religious affairs.

The petitioners said releasing Bishop Su would bring "unmeasurable positive and realistic meaning to the country".

Bishop Su, 82, was arrested in 1996 and deemed a "counterrevolutionary" by the Communist government for refusing to join the government-sanctioned Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. He escaped detention in 1997 before being re-arrested. His family discovered him by chance at a Baoding hospital in 2003. He has not been seen in public since.

His family had appealed to United Front officials from Beijing last October. A second appeal in January to Yu Zhengsheng, a standing committee member of the Politburo, resulted in several days of house arrest for family members.

The latest petition was signed by Su Tianyou, Bishop Su's nephew and a lay leader in Baoding, Father Pietro Cui Xingang, former rector of Baoding's Donglu Marian Shrine who is now serving in Rome, and Father Lu Genjun, vicar-general of Baoding's underground community who was released in August 2014 after eight years of detention.

However, in an Aug. 28 meeting, United Front Work officials told family members that the arrest of Bishop Su at the time was made by the party's Political and Legal Commission and that they did not know the bishop's current whereabouts, a source close to the bishop's family told ucanews.com.

"The officials said the bishop is a bargaining chip. It is difficult to release him if China-Vatican relations do not improve," the source added.

Missing

Two other Hebei bishops also have been missing since being arrested by Chinese authorities. Coadjutor Bishop Cui Tai of Xuanhua disappeared after being arrested in August 2014 while Bishop Cosmas Shi Enxiang, 94, of Yixing disappeared 14 years ago.

A source earlier told ucanews.com that Bishop Shi died in detention in January. However, a government authority later denied Bishop Shi was dead, but refused to disclose his location.

According to the official Xinhua News Agency, thousands of war veterans are being pardoned in the eighth amnesty since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

The amnesty was being granted to thousands of prisoners who were not deemed a threat to society and sentenced before Jan. 1 this year, including criminals who fought against the Japanese and Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang troops during the 1946-49 Chinese civil war, Xinhua said.

The amnesty also covered those over 75 years old, disabled or unable to care for themselves, Xinhua said. The oldest was aged 95.

Anhui officials raid house church's summer camp

ChinaAid (13.08.2015) - <http://www.chinaaid.org/2015/08/anhui-officials-raid-house-churchs.html> - Local government officials raided a house church in China's eastern Anhui province on July 28 and issued a notice demanding the church stop its religious activities.

Qiaotou House Church in Chuzhou was leading a summer camp for 20 elementary and secondary school children when they were surrounded by 20 special police officers, more than 100 regular police, education bureau officials, two principals and a teacher. The church was accused of arranging a private meeting place, which is against China's religious policy. The police and officials took all 20 students away and detained a church member.

During the raid, government officials took photographs and filmed the incident. When church members attempted to record the encounter on their phones, police confiscated the phones, injuring one man's wrist in the process.

"They snatched our cameras, and the principals took our students away. I asked them, 'Why do you need to send your special police for children this young? Why do you treat us like terrorists?' After that, they finally left," Lu Jingxiang, the church's pastor, said. Lu also told China Aid that one church member was taken to the police station but was later released.

Because of the church's violation of religious policy, the government issued an administrative penalty notice, which stated that the church must stop their religious activities immediately. Lu told China Aid's reporter that he negotiated with the government officials. An official attempted to force him to sign the administrative penalty notice, but he refused, he said.

According to Chinese law, children under the age of 18 may not learn about religion. As a result, the children's parents were sternly warned not to allow them to participate in the summer camp. Lu recounts, "The night before the summer camp, teachers went to the children's family to talk to the parents and forbade the children from participating in the church activities." However, since the children came from Christian families, their parents

wanted them to develop Christian characters and sent them anyway, Lu said. The church continued the summer camp the next day.

Authorities release Wenzhou Pastor Huang Yizi, church faces cross demolition

ChinaAid (11.08.2015) - <http://www.chinaaid.org/2015/08/authorities-release-wenzhou-pastor.html> - After one year in jail for leading a prayer vigil against cross demolitions in China's coastal Zhejiang, authorities released Pastor Huang Yizi and allowed him to return to his home in Wenzhou in the early morning of Aug. 1.

On Aug. 3, 2014, Huang organized a group of Christians to pray in front of a church to protest forced cross removal. That same day, he was detained. Authorities formally arrested him on [Aug. 28, 2014](#), and sentenced him to one year in prison for "gathering a crowd to disturb public order."

In a letter written after his release, Huang stated that he was interrogated 100 times, with each session lasting between one to 6-1/2 hours. The letter also stated that Huang chose to view his time in prison as a Sabbatical in which he shared his faith and converted other prisoners to Christianity.

He was in good spirits following his release but looked physically weak, according to one of his church members.

Despite his recent imprisonment, China Aid's reporter says that he faces an even greater battle now because his church's cross is the government's next target for demolition.

Severe crackdown in China on church crosses draws backlash

AP (05.08.2015) - About a dozen Catholics wept and sang hymns outside their church as a man climbed to the top of the building and sliced off its steel cross with a cutting torch. It toppled with a thud.

"Aren't you ashamed of what you have done?" a teary woman yelled at the more than 100 security guards, who along with police and government workers kept the parishioners of Lower Dafei Catholic Church from protecting the symbol of their faith. The guards, who stood with shields and batons in the sun for nearly two hours, looked indifferent.

"Doesn't the government give us the right to religious freedom? Why are they taking down our symbol without any explanation?" another parishioner said hours earlier, as government workers arrived to build the scaffolding to reach the cross.

"We have violated no law. We do not oppose the government," said the parishioner, who gave his name only as Chen for fear of retaliation from authorities. "We have been good, law-abiding citizens."

Authorities in southeastern Zhejiang province are believed to be under a two-month deadline to remove crosses from the spires, vaults, roofs and wall arches of the 4,000 or so churches that dot the landscape of this economically thriving region.

In a rare move, even China's semiofficial Christian associations — which are supposed to ensure the ruling Communist Party's control over Protestant and Catholic groups — have denounced the campaign as unconstitutional and humiliating. They have warned that it could risk turning the faithful into enemies of the party.

The campaign is believed to be the will of President and Communist Party leader Xi Jinping, whose administration has launched the most severe crackdown in decades on social forces that might challenge the monopoly of the party's rule.

But Yang Fenggang, an expert on China's religions at Purdue University, said the party may have miscalculated and could be creating the very instability it is trying to avoid.

"The crackdown has alienated the Christians in China, who are otherwise law-abiding citizens," Yang said.

He said the campaign to assert state power over officially sanctioned churches has been ordered by the central government and is likely being carried out as a kind of experiment in Zhejiang, where the provincial party chief, Xia Baolong, is a trusted ally of Xi.

The massive campaign comes one year after the provincial leadership ordered the razing of several churches and hundreds of rooftop crosses deemed to be illegal structures. This summer, Zhejiang banned rooftop crosses altogether. Despite criticism that the new rule violates China's constitutional right of religious freedom, local enforcers are sending demolition crews to virtually all the province's churches.

They have met with resistance. Parishioners have kept vigils and tried to block entrances to church grounds with cargo trucks, and many churches have re-erected crosses in defiance.

Since Xi came into power in late 2012, Beijing has hushed voices critical of its policies and practices in China's social media, locked up members of the New Citizens Movement who had called for greater government accountability, and, most recently, rounded up rights lawyers who insist China's law must be followed to the letter and applied equally to the people and the state.

"The authorities are especially worried that those with religious beliefs have a strong sense of identity and belonging, which can translate into huge social forces," said Zhao Chu, an independent commentator.

In targeting Christians, the party is going after a group possibly bigger than itself. Yang said Christians probably number close to 100 million after more than three decades of rapid growth, though official figures are much lower. The Communist Party has nearly 88 million members.

In a troubling sign for the party, a sizable portion of its nominally atheist membership holds Christian, Buddhist, Muslim or other beliefs. The party is worried that religion — especially versions of Christianity rooted in the West — could subvert its rule.

The party tried to wipe out religion altogether during the ideological fervor of the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, but later restored the right to worship. In ensuing decades, religious participation has grown as people seek to fill a spiritual void.

Still, Beijing retains tight controls over all religious groups, requiring them to register with the state or be labeled illegal. It claims the exclusive right to appoint Catholic bishops within China, instead of the Vatican.

In the western regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, where Buddhist and Islamic beliefs mingle with ethnic identities, the government also has sought to curb some of the visible symbols of faith, including beards and veils, and installed surveillance cameras in and around monasteries and mosques.

The rules Zhejiang adopted in early July say crosses should be wholly affixed to a building facade and be no more than one-tenth of the facade's height. No rationale has been provided, and the provincial government did not respond to an Associated Press request for an interview.

The Catholic Patriotic Association of Zhejiang has said it is illegal to remove crosses from properly registered churches. The Christian Association of Zhejiang warned the act has caused animosity toward the ruling party. Both groups called for an immediate halt.

Yang said the rare open opposition from the government-sanctioned Christian associations, which serve as liaisons between the authorities and rank-and-file Christians, means the authorities could lose this important conduit. "Now this bridge has been burned," he said.

Fear, frustration and fury are probably most palpable in the municipality of Wenzhou, tucked between China's eastern coastline and rugged mountain ranges. With its 2,000 or so churches, Wenzhou, home to 9 million people, is as well-known as a bastion of Christianity as it is for its gritty entrepreneurship.

Almost every township has its own claim to a line of products — whether it be buttons, shoe soles, pet products or children's toys. Almost every village has a church or two, joining the landscape of rice paddies, farmhouses and factories.

Zhu Libin, president of the Wenzhou Christian Association, is torn between fellow Christians, who want him to speak on their behalf, and local authorities, who want him to persuade churches to comply.

"As a Christian, I want to see the cross lifted as high as possible, but as a citizen of China, I have to follow the rule when asked," he said in an interview at his downtown Wenzhou office.

When asked to comment on the continuing cross removals, he stood up and walked out. Moments later, he returned but refused to answer.

Zhu Weifang, an officially appointed bishop, declined to be interviewed, but he and two dozen other Catholic officials and priests signed a strongly worded letter calling the new rules unlawful.

"The more (authorities) suppress the call for justice, the more it shows they are faced with severe social crisis, that they have little confidence in their ability to rule, and that they are incompetent in dealing with issues," said the letter, which urges parishioners to "fight by law of reason to defend our very basic right to our religion."

In village churches, Protestants and Catholics are defying orders to remove crosses on their own and keeping around-the-clock vigils in slim hopes of holding off demolition crews. Many have defiantly re-erected the crosses.

Tears welled in the eyes of Tu Shouzhe when he recalled how authorities forcibly removed the cross from his Protestant church in the village of Muyang on a hot, humid summer afternoon.

"It was a surprise attack. We did not let them in, but they broke in by cutting off the lock. We demanded paperwork, but they showed us none. They cordoned us away from the church," Tu said. "They had 60-70 people. We had just about a dozen or so. Everyone was crying. Our hearts ached. We felt powerless to resist, and only prayed and sang hymns."

In the Zhejiang city of Jinhua, two pastors from the official Jinhua City Christian Church have been detained on suspicion of corruption after the two refused to remove the rooftop cross from a newly-built sanctuary, lawyer Liu Weiguo said Wednesday.

In Lower Dafei Village, the demolition crew descended one morning last week, but soon realized it could not scale the spire to get to the cross. They returned in the afternoon with poles for scaffolding and a cutting torch. Officials barred a photographer and video-journalist from the AP from documenting the demolition, but another reporter was present, apparently the first news media to capture images of such a cross removal.

One parishioner sat in the narrow entrance to the church grounds, trying to block the intruders, but was ordered to leave. He never spoke a word but kept his eyes on the cross and prayed silently.

As several men built the scaffolding, parishioners' tearful singing echoed over the church grounds: "He uses the love of the cross, the cross, to conquer the man."

China-Turkey relationship strained over Uighurs

Burnt Chinese flags, attacks on Chinese restaurants, alleged attacks on tourists who were mistaken for being Chinese and protests across the country.

BBC (09.07.2015) - <http://bbc.in/1Hh8tUO> - For the last 10 days anti-Chinese sentiment has been on the rise in Turkey.

Turkish Muslims and Uighurs from the far western region of China share ethnicity and have close cultural and religious ties.

The protests started following reports that Uighurs in China had been banned from fasting during the holy month of Ramadan.

Muslims worldwide observe Ramadan, when the faithful abstain from eating and drinking during daylight hours.

"Our people have been saddened over the news that Uighur Turks have been banned from fasting or carrying out other religious duties in the Xinjiang region," Turkey's foreign ministry said in a statement last week.

In response, China said it fully respects the freedom of Muslim religious beliefs and the accusations that religious rites had been banned in Xinjiang this Ramadan were "completely at odds with the facts" and exaggerated by the western media.

It said: "No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in religion or no religion. They may not discriminate against religious citizens and non-religious citizens."

Cihan Yavuz's Chinese restaurant, Happy China, was attacked by an angry mob in Istanbul last week.

"People are scared to come here, scared of another attack," he said.

"If people want to protest the Chinese government, they can hold demonstrations in front of its embassy. It's not right to use violence for the sake of protesting," he said.

There were further reports of disturbances in Istanbul on Saturday as the Grey Wolves - the youth wing of the far right nationalist party MHP - held a march.

Chinese tourist guide Miray Hamit said four or five men with knives attacked a tourist in her group.

"They asked us where we were from and when we said we were Chinese they started hitting one of us.

"A Turkish tourist guide and I intervened to stop the attack. We all got scared. One of us got injured, though nothing serious thankfully. I got hit too," she said.

Miray Hamit thought the attackers were not necessarily affiliated with the Grey Wolves rally and could have just been passing.

'We trust Turkey'

Turkish media though reported a group of Korean tourists believed to be Chinese were attacked during the Grey Wolves' protests, an allegation they deny.

The head of Grey Wolves in Istanbul, Ahmet Yigit Yildirim, alleged the scuffles that took place were actually between the police and protesters and no harm was done to any tourists. He said no complaint was made against them.

"The safety of every tourist coming to our country is our responsibility. We can't tolerate any sort of violence," he said.

Police sources were unable to speak to the BBC. However, the Korean consulate in Istanbul said they had not received any complaints or reports of any attacks against Korean citizens in the city.

In the Turkish media the leader of MHP, Devlet Bahçeli, hinted at the possibility that a Korean may have been confused with a Chinese.

But Chinese tourists do not seem deterred by the rising anti-China sentiment in Turkey.

"We are aware of what's going on. But we didn't encounter any problems. We trust Turkey. Turkish people have been very friendly to us," tourist Lucky Zhang said.

This week, the Chinese government issued travel advice to its citizens travelling to Turkey and warned them against getting too close to protests or filming them.

Who are the Uighurs?

- Uighurs are ethnically Turkic Muslims
- They make up about 45% of the Xinjiang region's population; 40% are Han Chinese
- China re-established control in 1949 after crushing short-lived state of East Turkestan
- Since then, there has been large-scale immigration of Han Chinese and Uighurs fear erosion of their culture

- Xinjiang is officially designated an autonomous region within China, like Tibet to its south

'Why do you have a beard?'

Turkey is one of the most popular destinations for Uighurs fleeing China.

In 2009, then Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc said there were more than 300,000 Uighurs living in Turkey.

Mehmet Soylemez, a Turkish academic living in China since 2006 said the exodus increased especially in the last two years.

"Uighurs do not lead a comfortable life in China because of restrictions on religious rituals or social inequality.

"Those who feel pressurised or those who have been in and out of prison prefer to leave the country," he said.

A Uighur who moved to Turkey in December 2014 and wished to remain anonymous fearing reprisal from the Chinese authorities, said he experienced "atrocities" first hand.

"Last year, on a holy night in Ramadan almost 50 members of our family gathered to have a meal.

"My daughter came and told me that we were surrounded by soldiers. They detained us, questioned us till early morning. They asked for \$1,000 (£650; 905 euros) each to set us free.

"When you sit at your house with four to five friends, when you pray, they break the door and start questioning you.

"'Why do you have a beard? Why are you reciting from the Koran? Why are the women covered?'" they ask.

"Then they put you in prison. They even detained my 10-year-old son with his four friends."

He said he passed through Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia to reach Turkey.

Now he, his wife and four children live in a flat in Istanbul, with five other families.

The Chinese government has been trying to control religious expression in Xinjiang by imposing rules on the Uighur community.

Critics say it is exacerbating the situation.

Some controls witnessed in parts of Xinjiang include:

- Women forbidden from wearing veils
- Uighurs are also not allowed to buy knives in some parts
- Praying is strictly regulated. People under 18 are not allowed in mosques
- Couples have to apply to the government for a marriage certificate and may not be married in secret by an imam
- Only older Uighur men are allowed to have beards

'Miss my country'

Ramadan is a sensitive time in Xinjiang following a rise in attacks blamed by Beijing on Islamist militants over the past two years. Hundreds have died in the violence.

Chinese authorities deny pressurising the Muslim minority in the country.

But the Uighur man said he did not intend to go back.

"I miss my country. It's where I was born, where I grew up.

"But I'm happy in Turkey. I'm free. I can dress however I like. I can conduct my religious rituals. If I ever go back, they will put me in prison immediately," he said.

China cross demolition campaign spreads to other dioceses

UCA News (07.07.2015) - A Chinese government-led cross demolition campaign has spread from Wenzhou to other dioceses in Zhejiang province with five Catholic churches having their crosses removed last week.

The crosses on churches in Songmun, Xinhe, Muyu and Dasi of Taizhou diocese as well as the Xiaoshan Sacred Heart of Jesus Church of Hangzhou diocese were demolished July 2.

Authorities said the crosses were removed in order to "Sinicize" the churches, a local source in Taizhou told ucanews.com. "When we asked the officials what means by "Sinicize" the churches, they said they did not know either but they have to remove the crosses anyway," he added.

"It is obviously an action directed against Christianity," the source said.

"Sinicization" of religion was first mentioned by Chinese President Xi Jinping during the central United Front Work Department meeting in May.

Under the policy, churches must adapt to Chinese society by using symbols that reflect Chinese culture under Communist rule.

In late 2013, the Chinese government embarked on a demolition campaign, with a number of high-profile demolitions of Protestant churches.

A Protestant catechist told ucanews.com that at least 1,100 churches were recorded as having its crosses removed, although the number could be much higher.

A Catholic source in Hangzhou said he witnessed the cross removal at the Xiaoshan church.

"The parish priests are left alone to face the political pressure in the campaign. There is little support from their hierarchy, and there is no united action among dioceses in the same province," said the source who asked not to be named.

"The authorities told our priests either allow the cross to be removed or have the whole church building demolished. It was a dilemma and they were inclined to compromise," he said.

"Some priests have demanded the local hierarchy to issue a statement earlier with regards to the demolition but the draft turns out to be an indifferent one. Some Church

leaders said it would be bad if we made the government angry. But see what happens now?" the Hangzhou source said.

The Sacred Heart Church was the fourth church to have its cross removed in Hangzhou. Another church in Fuyang city was notified last month that it too will face the same fate.

"The officials said that only the Catholic cathedral and two Protestant churches will be saved from the campaign," the Hangzhou source revealed.

Religion in China grows among young people, Islam most popular among followers under 30: Report

International Business Times (07.07.2015) - Religion has a robust following among China's younger generation despite the country's rule by the officially atheist Communist Party. A report released Tuesday found religion followers in China are younger, with Islam having the most followers among the under-30 set.

China recognizes only five religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam. Islam has the largest proportion of young followers, with 22.4 percent of those queried for the annual China Religion Survey, which was conducted by the National Survey Research Center at Beijing's Renmin University.

"Islam tends to have a younger demographic," Wei Dedong, a professor of Buddhist studies at the School of Philosophy at Renmin who had a hand in the research, told the state-run Global Times. "Most believers of Islam belong to ethnic minority groups and it is common for a woman to give birth to several children. The children would also become Muslims while it is very rare to have an adult converting to Islam."

Catholicism was the second-most-practiced religion among those under 30, following Islam closely at 22 percent.

Unsurprisingly, religions traditionally practiced by Chinese like Buddhism and Taoism, still remained popular among religious worshippers at least 60 years of age. In general, the survey found Buddhism has the highest number of followers of the five religions.

Wei said the research also found an increased interest from the government to maintain relations with local leaders and religious communities. The Administration for Religious Affairs visited places of worship 3.8 times a year, which Wei said is a sign the government is taking the initiative when it comes to the growth of religion in China. However, these steps toward freedom to practice religion are hampered by recent restrictions imposed by the government.

Local government bodies in far western Xinjiang province, home to a predominantly Muslim population, announced limits on Ramadan, restricting children, government employees and teachers from fasting during the holy month, in addition to other associated traditions.

Additionally, the Vatican has struggled to maintain relations with its Chinese followers after the government-sanctioned Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association was introduced as the main Catholic authority in the country, going as far as appointing local bishops, a task normally only performed by the Holy See.

Despite trying to keep low profile, unnamed 'Little Flock' house church in Guangzhou raided

China Aid (29.06.2015) <http://www.chinaaid.org/2015/06/despite-trying-to-keep-low-profile.html> - Despite trying to keep a low profile by going without a name, a small house church that traces its roots back to famed Chinese church leader Watchman Nee's Little Flock has been raided and ordered to stop meeting.

The May 24 raid in the Baiyun District of the southern city of Guangzhou only recently came to light when Ma Chao, leader of the Guangfu Church, told China Aid's special correspondent in Hong Kong, Qiao Nong, that the 100-plus police officers and government officials who raided Guangfu Church on May 24 were also in the building to raid the other church, which was meeting on the first floor.

"Unlike us, they did not give their church a name. It is only a church meeting place," Ma explained. "We are on the second floor; they are one the first floor."

He said that on the day of the raid, "it seemed strange to us that so many police came that day. Now I understand that it wasn't just us they were coming to mess with. Some came to where we were and the others went to their place. They were here to persecute two churches."

Despite drawing more worshippers to its Sunday services, the other church did not try to fight the May 24 government order to stop meeting and has simply disbanded, unlike the Guangfu Church, which has hired a lawyer and is suing the local religious affairs bureau.

"I ran into them this morning and they said, 'Oh, you can still come here for church?' I said yes. They said, 'police came to us and won't let us meet.' They said they didn't insist and just disbanded," Ma said, adding that the church made no attempt to defend its right to freedom of religious belief. It regularly draws about 150 people to its Sunday worship services, while attendance at Guangfu church the day of the raid was only 20 Christians.

The church is part of Watchman Nee's Little Flock movement, one of the early 20th century's fastest-growing native Protestant movements in mainland China. Both churches had purchased space in the building in Baiyun District's Chunting Garden to serve as their church meeting site.

The unnamed Little Flock church is not the only one that has bowed to government pressure and stopped meeting. Other churches in Guangzhou and Shenzhen have also given in to government pressure after church members were summoned for police questioning.

Ma said that in one case, a church in Guangzhou had paid 80,000 Yuan (U.S. \$12,877) to rent a church meeting site but never got to hold a single meeting there before the local authorities told them to move.

Religious persecution has been increasing in Guangdong province. Including the Little Flock church and Guangfu Church, Royal Victory Church was forcibly evicted, a rehabilitation facility was prohibited from holding small Christian services and another church in Haidu District, Guangzhou was warned not to hold worship services.

China considers harsher punishment for cults

China daily (24.06.2015) - China's legislators are discussing harsher punishment for those involved in cults or superstitious activities that hamper the implementation of laws and regulations.

According to a draft amendment to the Criminal Law, deliberated on Wednesday, in serious cases the maximum punishment may be extended to life imprisonment, in addition to fines or confiscation of property.

The same punishment may also be meted out to those who cause death or heavy casualties as a result of cult activity or using superstition to deceive.

The draft amendment was submitted to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC), the top legislature, for a second reading during its bimonthly session, which runs from Wednesday to July 1.

Currently, the maximum sentence for those found guilty of cult-related crimes is 15 years in prison.

According to the draft amendment, in minor cases violators will be stripped of their political rights, sentenced to no more than three years in prison and fined.

Harsher punishment will be given to those found guilty of crimes including rape or fraud, according to the draft amendment.

China steps up controls in unruly Xinjiang as Ramadan approaches

Reuters (16.06.2015) - Some local governments in China's unruly far western region of Xinjiang are stepping up controls on the Islamic faith followed by the Uighur people ahead of Ramadan, including making officials swear they will not fast.

The holy month, which begins this week, is a sensitive time in Xinjiang following an uptick in deadly attacks blamed by Beijing on Islamist militants over the past three years in which hundreds have died.

In recent days, state media and government websites in Xinjiang have published stories and official notices demanding that party members, civil servants, students and teachers in particular do not to observe Ramadan, something that happened last year too.

In Jinghe county near the Kazakh border, food safety officials decided last week that they would "guide and encourage" halal restaurants to stay open as normal during Ramadan, the government said on its website.

Those that do stay open would get fewer visits from food safety inspectors, it added.

Muslims worldwide observe Ramadan, during which many abstain from eating and drinking during daylight hours.

Other government institutions have given similar instructions.

In Maralbexi county, where 21 died in violent unrest in 2013, party officials had to give verbal as well as written assurances "guaranteeing they have no faith, will not attend religious activities and will lead the way in not fasting over Ramadan", state media said.

Exiled Uighur groups and human rights activists say the government's repressive policies in Xinjiang, including restrictions on religious practices, have provoked unrest, allegations denied by Beijing.

"China is increasing its bans and monitoring as Ramadan approaches. The faith of the Uighurs has been highly politicized, and the increase in controls could cause sharp resistance," Dilxat Raxit, spokesman for the exiled Uighur group, the World Uyghur Congress, said in a statement.

Telephone calls to the Xinjiang government's spokesman seeking comment were not answered.

The government there has always denied trying to curb fasting, though officials and people younger than 18 are banned from participating in religious activities.

On Sunday, Xinjiang's Communist Party chief, Zhang Chunxian, warned that the region's stability faced "sustained pressure" from religious extremists.

China's Communist Party says it protects freedom of religion, but it maintains a tight grip on religious activities and allows only officially recognized religious institutions to operate.

China has around 20 million Muslims spread throughout the country, only a portion of which are Uighur, a Turkic-language speaking group that calls Xinjiang home.

Ongoing violations contradict State Council's report on human rights progress

CSW (11.06.2015) - On 8 June, China's Office of the State Council issued a white paper praising the "tremendous achievements China has made in its human rights endeavours" in 2014. However, recent and ongoing human rights violations, including restrictions on religious communities, contradict many of the authors' assertions.

The paper, entitled Progress in China's Human Rights in 2014, pledges that the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government will "develop various undertakings conducive to the protection and realization of human rights". In a section on ethnic minorities, the paper asserts that "freedom of religious belief of ethnic minorities fully guaranteed"; in support, the authors list the number of religious venues and Buddhist clergy in Tibet, and states that the Chinese Islamic Association has set up a Uygur-language website introducing "religious knowledge".

In fact, Uygur Muslims' religious observance continues to be severely restricted; in 2015, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief described China's actions against Uighur Muslims as "a major problem", and cited "very disturbing stories" of harassment and intimidation. In Tibet, restrictions on the use of photographs of and references to the Dalai Lama are rigidly enforced, and Tibetan religious sites are subject to heavy surveillance and sometimes military presence.

Although the paper does not specifically mention the situation of other religious groups in China, it does claim that efforts are being made to promote the direct registration of social organisations, allowing citizens to safeguard their legitimate rights and interests and engage in social services. However, a new draft law concerning foreign non-government organisations (NGOs) in China has drawn severe criticism from the international community. According to critics, the proposed law would significantly restrict the activities of foreign NGOs and could affect some academic institutions and religious organisations.

While the paper claims that judicial openness and reform advanced in 2014, rights lawyers in China continue to face significant obstacles. In "sensitive" cases, lawyers are often denied access to clients and can even be harassed and detained themselves: lawyer Chang Boyang, for example, was detained for defending such cases, including that of Zhang Cuijuan, who served an 18 month sentence for "gathering a crowd to disrupt public order" after her brother, Pastor Zhang Shaojie, and over 20 church members were detained in November 2013.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "While the government's aim to "protect and realize human rights" is commendable, the mistreatment of those advocating for human rights sharply contradicts this message. Barely a week goes by without reports of lawyers being harassed or detained: increasingly, the crackdown on civil society is spreading to journalists, netizen-activists, academics and NGOs working on a variety of issues. The detention of Christians opposing the removal of church crosses in Zhejiang, the harassment of lawyers defending religious communities, and the imprisonment of clergy who have defended the rights of others, clearly show that key human rights, including freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression, have yet to be realised. We urge the Chinese government to put into practice what has been set down on paper, to turn words into action, and to allow civil society to participate in the protection of human rights and freedom of religion or belief."

Guangzhou authorities attempt to stop gathering of recently-persecuted Guangfu House Church

China Aid (10.06.2015) - Government harassment of Guangfu House Church in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou is continuing into a second month, with local officials attempting to stop a church meeting on June 4, the 26th anniversary of the bloody crackdown on the 1989 student-led pro-democracy movement in Beijing.

Sixteen officials from the city's Baiyun District Religious Affairs Bureau and Domestic Security Protection Squad and the local sub-district neighborhood committee management office showed up at 11 a.m. at the storefront where the church was meeting and told them to stop, church leader Ma Chao told China Aid's special correspondent in Hong Kong, Qiao Nong.

"We counted — there were 16 of them. They came in two vehicles," Ma said, adding that the vehicles had signs showing that they were from the State Administration for Industry and Commerce.

"Because we were meeting in a storefront, they even knocked on our door. I called my lawyer," Ma said. "I asked them who they were, what they were doing here, whether they had any paperwork.

"A woman officer from the local police station said they were there to visit me. I said I

don't have time now. We didn't open the door for them, and about 20 minutes later, after videotaping, they left," Ma said.

Also on June 4, the Baiyun District Court notified Ma that the church's suit against the religious affairs bureau, filed on May 26, was being dismissed. Ma said that they were not dropping the lawsuit and would continue to pursue the matter.

Authorities demolish huge multi-million dollar church

Christian Today (09.06.2015) - <http://www.chinaaid.org/2015/06/christian-today-china-authorities.html> - A huge multi-million dollar cathedral-style church is being demolished in China, the latest church to go under the wrecking ball in a long-running campaign which reflects the growing concern in Beijing about the rise of the Christian evangelical movement.

The Three Self Patriotic Movement church in Wangling, Zhejiang is not an unofficial house church like so many in China, but is one that is sanctioned by the government. It is to be rebuilt elsewhere and compensation of about \$161,000 paid for the loss the old one.

The destruction mirrors that of the \$5 million Sanjiang church in Wenzhou, also in Zhejiang, demolished last year just weeks after it was completed. It is being reported in detail on Twitter from Texas with pictures and links by Chinese Christian pastor Bob Fu, founder and president of China Aid

More than 450 crosses on official Protestant churches have also been removed from churches in the province in the last 18 months after the local government announced that all crosses must be taken off the tops of the buildings. However, churches can now affix them to the sides of the buildings but they cannot be too prominent.

Some worshippers are reported to be fighting back and replacing the crosses as they are removed, sometimes more than once a day.

According to the Christian Science Monitor, Chinese authorities are also infiltrating congregations to try and find out which party members are also practising Christians. In China, it is forbidden to be both a Christian and a member of the Communist Party.

There are no precise figures but estimates have put the number of Protestants in China at between 50 and 100 million and the number of Catholics at six million. There are thought to be about 70 million party members.

As the parish priest at Baoding's Mary Queen of China Church is arrested, another Catholic altar is demolished

Asia News (27.05.2015) - 20 years after Fr Liu Honggeng Liu, vice rector of Our Lady Queen of China shrine and parish in Baoding (central province of Hebei), "was arrested by local authorities, who took him into custody on 7 May to prevent pilgrimages to his church," a local Catholic source told *AsiaNews*.

"Xi Jinping's recent statement to the United Front on religions has boosted extremist views among local authorities, who now feel entitled to do what they want," said the source, who spoke on condition of anonymity for security reasons.

Fr Liu "was getting ready for the Marian month," the source noted. "Chinese Catholics, especially in Baoding, feel very close to this period of the year. The diocese has about 500,000 believers, in the official and underground Churches, and everyone is particularly devoted to Our Lady."

"There are more than 70 priests and the pastoral ministry is very much alive, despite the persecution. People are often arrested or detained because the area is a stronghold of the underground Church. But we did not expect Fr Liu to be arrested again."

The priest has already spent eight years in prison, convicted without trial for refusing to join the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association in 2006.

"He is a good pastor and a good person," the source said. "His parishioners have tried to find out his whereabouts after he disappeared but without success. We hope and pray that he will soon come back to us. He had been released only last August. "

The source told *AsiaNews* that "Xi Jinping's statement about the need for 'Chinese' religions without 'foreign influences' has boosted the most extreme elements inside the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. Before they had taken a wait-and-see attitude but now they feel entitled to attack by the new leader."

The aforementioned association is a government body that controls China's official Catholic Church. In his Letter to the Chinese Church, Pope Benedict XVI described such an organisation as "irreconcilable with Catholic doctrine".

In the same diocese, the authorities have demolished an eight by six metres altar, built in February by a group of local Catholics.

Some 40 agents carried out the operation without informing the faithful and without a warrant, *UCAN* news agency reported. Two women, members of the congregation, tried to prevent the destruction but were injured in the commotion.

The authorities have also released Mgr Julius Jia Zhiguo, bishop of Zhengding (Hebei) after 12 days of detention.

The prelate has a history of arrests and releases. In April, he had ordained some priests. Last Sunday, he was able to celebrate the feast of Pentecost with his faithful.

Moscow Patriarchate: China authorises the ordination of Chinese Orthodox priests on its territory

Asia News (19.05.2015) - In order to compensate for its isolation from the West over the Ukrainian crisis, Moscow has revived its strategic alliance with Beijing, a step that includes the Church. Indeed, for the first time in 60 years, the People's Republic of China has authorised the ordination of Chinese Orthodox priests.

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Synodal Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, made the announcement after an official visit to China (14-17 May), the *TASS* news agency reported. In Beijing, the Russian Orthodox Church official took part in the fourth session of the Sino-Russian working group for contacts and cooperation in religious matters.

Hilarion's visit came a few days after President Xi Jinping travelled to Moscow (8 to 9 May) for the 70th anniversary of the Soviet victory over the Nazis, which was deserted en masse by Western leaders.

After the meetings with Vladimir Putin, Xi held talks with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, who praised Beijing for the value China places on the "role of culture, traditions and the moral factor in shaping the lives of people and individuals."

"We had very constructive talks with the State Administration for Religious Affairs," Bishop Hilarion said. "We agreed on the ordination to the priesthood of an ethnic Chinese who studied for several years in Russia. We hope that he will serve in Harbin at the Church of the Intercession," which is currently undergoing restoration. "Until now it had no priest. Now, God willing, it will have a priest".

On 14 May in Beijing, Hilarion met Wang Zuoan director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (*pictured*). "We agreed that two other seminarians will study in Russia, with a view to their possible ordination," he explained. In fact, "I hope that Orthodoxy will grow in China with the help of God," added the Patriarchate's 'foreign minister'.

In Beijing, Hilarion also took part in a panel discussion with representatives of 'traditional religions' of Russia and China and visited the oldest mosque in the city. He then travelled to Labdarin, in Inner Mongolia, which has one of the largest Orthodox communities in China, where he celebrated the Divine Liturgy in the Church of St Innokenty of Irkutsk, consecrated in 2009 by Michael Wang, the oldest priest of the Chinese Autonomous Orthodox Church.

In Labdarin, the representative of the Moscow Patriarchate also met with local political authorities and those in charge of religious affairs.

Orthodoxy in China

The Russian Orthodox Church arrived in China in the 17th century. The first communities were made up of Russian immigrants, mainly in the north of the country. Even today, most of China's 13,000 Orthodox Christians are of Russian origin, concentrated mostly in Harbin's Parish of the Intercession (Heilongjiang); in Labdarin (Inner Mongolia) as well as Kulj and Urumqi (Xinjiang).

The Chinese Orthodox Church acquired its autonomy in 1950, Kirill's secretary Deacon Alexander Volkov said; however, the Cultural Revolution left the country without bishops and priests. Even today, the faithful have no priest, gathering occasionally on Sundays to pray.

There are, however, 13 Chinese students at Orthodox Sretenskaya Theological Academy in Moscow and the Academy of St Petersburg. Russian priests celebrate the liturgical services at Christmas and Easter in Russia's embassy and consulates in China.

At the end of 2014, Kung Ming Cheung became the first ordained Chinese priest in Russia. He was sent to Saints Peter and Paul Parish in Hong Kong.

Cooperation between the Patriarchate and Beijing

The Patriarchate and the People's Republic have been cooperating for some years with Moscow involved in pushing Russian Orthodoxy on Chinese territory against its traditional rival represented by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which,

from Hong Kong has tried to have relations with Orthodox Christians in the mainland and other communities in the Far East.

"Religious cooperation" was officially sealed in 2013 when President Xi welcomed Kirill for the first time at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

In fact, China has come to recognise the Patriarchate's 'political' role in Russia. China's State Administration for Religious Affairs had directly invited the Russian Orthodox primate, with Moscow de facto recognising the latter as the main Chinese interlocutor in religious matters.

This should come as no surprise since the Russian Church has a long history of making compromises with authoritarian regime. Unlike the Holy See, it has shown no qualms about dealing with political authorities even when the life of its own community of faithful is at stake.

China seized boy monk, Tibetans call for his release

NPR (17.05.2015) - Two decades after a 6-year-old boy designated as Tibetan Buddhism's second most important spiritual leader was swept up by Chinese authorities and never heard from again, the Dalai Lama's government-in-exile has renewed a call for his release.

Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, who would be about 26 years old today, was chosen as the 11th Panchen Lama in 1995 after a lengthy search conducted by senior Tibetan monks determined him to be the reincarnated soul of the post's deceased predecessor.

On May 17, 1995, three days after he was anointed by the Dalai Lama, the boy was detained by Chinese authorities and promptly disappeared. Beijing subsequently named another child, Gyaincain Norbu, to the position.

On the anniversary of Gedhun's disappearance, Penpa Tsering, the speaker of the Tibetan Parliament in Dharamsala, India, appealed to the Chinese government to release him.

"I believe that the efforts of the Chinese government in keeping the Panchen Lama in a secret location is to deprive him of all the religious [training] that he [needs] to undertake so that he can teach to the future generations of Tibetans," Penpa said.

He said he believed China hoped to keep the Panchen Lama from learning the Tibetan language "so that he would not be in a position to communicate directly with the Tibetan people in the future."

China's choice for Panchen Lama, Gyaincain Norbu, has been largely rejected by Tibetans living outside of China.

He debuted on the international stage in 2006, urging Tibetans to work toward unity with China. And, six years later, speaking at the World Buddhist Forum in Hong Kong, he criticized "materialistic technology" and said greed had "unbalanced the ecosystems, contaminated the environments, caused natural disasters, spread epidemics, induced wars and hence endangered all sentient beings now and in future", according to a transcript of the 8-minute speech.

Xinjiang church members succeed in getting administrative punishment revoked

China Aid (06.05.2015) <http://www.chinaaid.org/2015/05/xinjiang-church-members-succeed-in.html> - Members of the Candlelight Church in China's far western Xinjiang recently won an administrative reconsideration lodged against the Hami Public Security Bureau. While the decision from the Hami Municipal People's Government stated that the administrative punishment issued following the initial conflict in January must be revoked, it also gave 60 days for the invocation of a new punishment provided it follows all legal stipulations.

The initial incident occurred on Jan. 10, 2015, when Party Secretary Zhu of the Hami Municipal Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau led the Hami Municipal Public Security Bureau and officers from other local government agencies to disrupt a gathering at Candlelight Church. Church members reported that more than 20 officers from the various agencies were present and that 10 of those officers were armed with submachine guns.

A church member told China Aid that Party Secretary Zhu showed the Christians a notice, stating that they were "engaging in an illegal religious activity." However, only two of the policemen, Han Wentao and a man with the surname Hai, showed their identification and no search warrant was ever produced.

"He ordered the officers to question us and take down our names, ID numbers, residential addresses, contact phone numbers, occupations, work units, family background, how we were converted to Christianity and other information. They also took photos of us. Then, they seized books, text materials, audio equipment, an electronic organ, projectors and other items from our church," the church member said.

Also confiscated was the property deed, which listed the three Christians the church members had voted to represent them as the owners of the gathering place, consisting of three rooms in the Yushang Building. The confiscated items' value equals 17,522 Yuan (U.S. \$2,826), including 972 Yuan (U.S. \$156) in confiscated cash.

Following the raid, Hami Municipal Public Security Bureau's Domestic Security Protection Squad (DSPS) division sealed the church.

"The DSPS agents also took Miao Yuexi, the pastor of Candlelight Church, to Liyuan Police Station for interrogation," the man said. "They also made a copy of all the information in Miao's two cell phones. He was released before dawn. Two days later, they summoned him to the police station for interrogation again. So far, he has been interrogated by the Hami DSPS twice and the Hami Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau twice.

"The religious affairs bureau decided that the donations from the church members, which were used to purchase the rooms we gather in, are illegal revenue and that the church should be fined three times the amount of the donations. The religious affairs bureau issued the church a fine of more than 50,000 Yuan (more than U.S. \$8,000)," he said.

Miao, along with Qian Aili, who are the "main organizers of illegal Christian activities," and the three men whose names were on the property deed, Hong Wanijun, Pan Cha and Li Guangming, "do not agree with the Administrative Punishment Decision" and filed an administrative reconsideration, according to the administrative review decision, below. As

previously stated, the Hami Municipal People's Government ruled to "revoke the Administrative Punishment Decision (2015, No. 01) issued by Hami Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission on Feb. 3, 2015 and demand the respondent to take new administrative actions within 60 days."

Christian persecution in Zhejiang more severe than first thought

UCA News (22.04.2015) <http://www.ucanews.com/news/christian-persecution-in-chinas-zhejiang-more-severe-than-first-thought-monitor/73439> - The scale of a church demolition campaign in China's Zhejiang province may be much greater than previously reported, US-based China Aid warned this week.

The campaign was already considered among the most destructive against Christianity in Asia in recent times with previous estimates of more than 400 crosses forcibly removed and about 35 churches destroyed since the end of 2013.

But the real number of crosses taken down may have reached 1,000 with up to 50 churches destroyed based on unverified reporting in Zhejiang's local media, China Aid said in its annual report for 2014.

"It appears that the scope of persecution may be wider than reported due to fear of reprisal from government authorities," it said.

Although Bishop Meng Qinglu of Inner Mongolia told ucanews.com last month he had heard that Beijing ordered the campaign to stop at the end of last year, crosses have reportedly been removed at three more churches in Zhejiang this month.

The day before Easter Sunday, authorities used a crane to pull down the cross on top of En Quan Church in Ningbo, according to news reports and pictures posted on Twitter.

China Aid's new assessment of the situation in Zhejiang estimated that, since the end of 2013, at least 1,300 Christians have been detained, arrested or held in custody for trying to protect churches in the province — again, many more than previously thought.

On March 24, Pastor Huang Yizi was sentenced to a year in prison for trying to protect a cross in Wenzhou, and a day later a court in the same city freed eight Christians on reprieve for trying to protect Sanjiang Church from demolition.

Overall, Christians in China endured four times as many cases of persecution last year affecting nearly 18,000 people which marked "perhaps the most severe suppressive measures since the Cultural Revolution", China Aid said.

Along with state-sanctioned churches in Zhejiang, unregistered house churches and cults were the main targets for authorities trying to curb the continued growth of Christianity in China.

"Although the majority of the characteristics that have defined persecution against the Church in previous years remains, the level and modes of persecution during 2014 has evolved," the report said.

The Chinese government has not responded to China Aid's report but has repeatedly denied an anti-Christian campaign in Zhejiang and religious persecution overall.

"The Chinese government protects its citizens' freedom of religion or belief as well as normal religious activities in accordance with the law," Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hong Lei said last month.

Although China Aid noted an outcry by the international community in response to China's growing intolerance of religious activity, so far there has been little action.

Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, told ucanews.com on Wednesday he would plan to send a letter to the Chinese government requesting an explanation over claims of wider persecution in Zhejiang. According to UN procedure, Beijing would then have 60 days to respond.

"It will then formally be taken on the record of the UN and used for further action," he said.

Recent media reports have suggested that Beijing had delayed accepting Bielefeldt's request to visit China, but he responded that his office has never formally asked for an invitation "because I would never be allowed to enter the country".

The Gospel Herald: Government-sanctioned persecution of Christians in China increased drastically in 2014

China Aid (24.04.2015) <http://www.chinaaid.org/2015/04/the-gospel-herald-government-sanctioned.html> - Texas-based nonprofit group China Aid Association has released a report on Tuesday, indicating that persecution against Christians in China has increased significantly from the Chinese government.

The [report](#), entitled "Religious and Human Rights Persecution in China," focused on religious persecution and human rights abuses carried out by the Chinese government in 2014. Rachel Ritchie released some of its statistics within a press release.

"Religious persecution and human rights abuse by the Chinese government against its citizens has risen 152.74 percent since 2013 based on six specific categories of persecution," Ritchie wrote. "In 2014, China Aid documented 572 cases of persecution in which 17,884 religious practitioners were persecuted, representing a 300 percent increase since 2013."

According to Ritchie, the six categories included "the total number of persecution cases, the number of religious practitioners persecuted, the number of citizens detained, the number of citizens sentenced, the number of severe abuse cases and the number of individuals in severe abuses cases." In addition, the number of citizens sentenced for their Christian faith "increased from 12 in 2013 to 1,274 in 2014."

"A number of factors led to the increase, including intense persecution in Zhejiang province as a result of the Chinese government-sanctioned 'Three Rectifications and One Demolition' campaign," Ritchie wrote. "In reality, the campaign indiscriminately removed and demolished crosses on church buildings and, in many cases, demolished the entire

church building, regardless of whether the building had been previously approved by the Chinese government."

Ritchie reported that this persecution campaign in China has been carried out both on house churches and Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) churches, which have officially registered with the Chinese government. She thought that some of the persecution could be attributed to "political reforms" instituted by China President Xi, which were meant to tackle corruption within the country.

"In response to the growth of Christianity in China, the Chinese government has instituted various campaigns to persecute both house churches and government-sanctioned TSPM churches throughout China by harassing, abusing, arresting, and, in many cases, sentencing pastors and church members to prison," Ritchie wrote.

In addition to Christians being targeted, Ritchie claimed that the government has also used the "political reforms" to persecute "religious communities, non-governmental organizations, human rights lawyers, and other religious and political so-called 'dissenters.'" However, some religious communities in China have begun to stand up for themselves, citing the rule of law.

"Although there is an escalation of persecution in China, religious communities are increasingly utilizing the rule of law to defend their rights in administrative proceedings and exposing ongoing abuse and the denial of religious freedom and related human rights via social media," Ritchie wrote.

In its report, China Aid expressed that the trend could continue for some time, adding that "all aspects of Chinese society will continue to be subjected to increased suppression, including the denial of religious freedom and related human rights." However, the organization contended that the latest round of "government-sponsored persecution" will pass, citing a passage from Exodus.

"You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exodus 20:5-6).

China jails a Muslim for six years — for refusing to shave his beard

The Washington Post (30.03.2015) - A Muslim was jailed for six years in China for refusing to shave off his beard, while his wife was imprisoned for two years for wearing a burqa, as part of a severe crackdown on religious "extremism" in the far-western province of Xinjiang, local media reported.

China blames rising violence in Xinjiang on Muslim fanatics and terrorists, and the government has been trying to force people to abandon conservative forms of Islam. Under an initiative known as Project Beauty, men wearing long beards and women in face-covering veils can be fined, as well as face surveillance and reeducation. Criminal punishments for these offenses were introduced in Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi, in February.

But the six-year jail sentence, reportedly for "picking quarrels and making trouble," would represent a particularly severe punishment. According to the Kashgar Special Zone

News, the 38-year-old man had grown a beard in 2010 and refused to shave it off despite repeated demands from local officials. It was unclear if he faced other charges: the maximum sentence for the reported charge is normally five years.

Critics see the crackdown on Islam as an intensification of long-standing repression of the culture and rights of Xinjiang's ethnic Uighur people, who face widespread economic and social discrimination. China sees it is a justifiable response to a series of bomb and knife attacks by extremists bent on violent jihad.

The man's wife was sentenced to two years because she wrote a confession to local authorities. The article quoted her as saying the court had given her "a chance to be reborn" and as vowing to repent for her mistakes when she is released.

The original report, issued Friday, cited the political and legal affairs committee of the Kashgar government as the source. It was picked up by major Chinese Web portals on Sunday, but later deleted by censors. On Monday, the reporter concerned wrote an apology for filing "a false report," although there was considerable skepticism online about whether this apology was genuine or made under pressure from red-faced local officials.

Dilxat Raxit, spokesman of the exiled World Uighur Congress, called the reported sentence unprecedented. "It's unacceptable and absurd, and shows China's hostile mentality and the crisis of its rule," he wrote in an e-mail. The aim, he added, was to "use judicial and administrative means to force Uighurs to give up their own way of life and accept the Chinese tradition." This, he warned, would only provoke people to fight back.

The story was originally issued as part of a series of stories on the achievements Kashgar has made in getting rid of burqas. Officials were quoted as boasting that the city's court has sentenced a number of "outlaws blinded by religious extremism, who wear burqas, veils and grow beards." The Kashgar Special Zone News is a free supplement included in local papers.

Each family has to sign a "de-radicalization" pledge, the paper reported, while a "buddy system" has been set up to "help" those who have been caught wearing burqas. In one village, the local authorities have educated and "converted" more than 100 women, while authorities have also encouraged religious people under 50 to shave off their beards, according to the paper.

In another township in Kashgar, 54 people who used to wear veils or beards were given training on skills such as baking, hairdressing and tailoring. "They have relatively low level of education and are deeply influenced by religious extremism," Wang Huailiang, a township party secretary, was quoted as saying. "But we must not discriminate against them. We must let them learn some skills so that they can make a living on their own."

As part of the efforts to eliminate extremism, people of all ages have been forced to dance to Chinese pop music and sing "red songs" -- in praise of revolution and the Chinese Communist Party.

On Chinese social media, the sentence provoked debate, Agence France-Presse reported. "Anyone dressed that way is a terrorist, not a Muslim!" wrote one user on Sina Weibo, a Chinese equivalent of Twitter.

Others dismissed the anti-beard campaign as a "simple and crude" measure that would do little to ensure public safety, while some noted that the German political theorist whose ideas inspired Communist parties across the world was far from clean-shaven.

"How many years would Marx have been sentenced to?" one user asked.

Chinese Pastor sentenced to one year in prison after defending churches against China's crackdown on crosses

Christian Daily (26.03.2015) - A Christian pastor in China was sentenced to one year in prison on Tuesday night by a local court after he defended local churches when the Chinese authorities removed church crosses.

Pastor Huang Yizi was sentenced by the People's Court in Pingyang County after being convicted of "gathering crowds to disturb social order," Yizi's lawyer, Zhang Kai, said, according to [The New York Times](#).

His lawyer said that he would appeal the court's verdict.

The pastor was originally detained in early August after officials attempted to remove a cross from his church in Wenzhou. Yizi criticized the Chinese authorities and had encouraged his congregation to continue to display crosses after they have been removed. He was arrested when authorities believed he was responsible for a crowd of more than 50 citizens clashing with the police.

[The Telegraph](#) reported that Yizi has been seen handcuffed in a yellow jumpsuit with the words "Pingyang County Detention Centre." Though his lawyer did not provide additional details on Yizi's current state, he believes he is innocent.

"As a defense lawyer and judging from the evidence so far I don't think Huang's actions constituted any crime. Personally, I believe Huang's arrest is directly related to the general crackdown on churches in Zhejiang," Kai said.

There has been a widespread crackdown on churches in China. Many churches are being stripped of their crosses that are on display, and some buildings are being demolished. Church members have become resilient in fighting back with the police. Last month, a video released by CNN shows a barricade of Christians clashing with riot police – some are rushed away in an ambulance, others are dragged away by police.

"What the government here is doing is so barbaric. Today we've seen the fundamental symbol of our faith violated and hurts us deep inside our hearts," Chen'Zai, a church leader in Wenzhou, told CNN.

Yizi has a wife and two young children whom he says all support his ministry. Many of his supporters told The Telegraph that he was a good, outspoken leader with a "strong sense of justice."

"I have decided to sacrifice for my beliefs. I am serious. I have been prepared for the worst since I posted many messages opposing the authorities' campaign to remove churches and crosses," Yizi said earlier this year.

Wenzhou is in the southeastern Zhejiang province of China and is known for its strong Christian population, often referred as "China's Jerusalem."

China's churches are only legal if they comply with strict government laws, including not having visible crosses. State officials removed more than 200 crosses in 2014.

Chinese police seize two priests in Mutanjiang

Asia News (22.03.2015) <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/BREAKING-NEWS:-Chinese-police-seize-two-priests-in-Mutanjiang-33786.html> - Chinese police seized two priests today in the city of Mutanjiang (Heilongjiang). The two clergymen - Fr Shaoyun Quan, 41, and Fr Jianyou Cao, 43 - had just celebrated Mass. After their arrest at 10.30 am, they were taken to an unknown location.

Fr Quan, the parish priest, and Fr Cao, his deputy, serve underground communities that are not recognised by the government. They perform their duties at locations that are not registered with the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Under existing rules, religious activities outside government control are illegal. Anyone involved in such actions can be arrested for "criminal" activities.

Still, local Catholics are stunned by the violence of the two clergymen's arrest. Although they are underground priests, their activities were known to police, and tolerated as long as they kept a "low profile". Indeed, the two carried out their duties, including evangelisation, "peacefully" and "quietly" in the past few months.

Lately, some observers and the international press have reported with some confidence that China would soon start talks with the Holy See over diplomatic relations.

Nothing to toast between China and the Vatican: Beijing wants complete control

Asia News (17.03.2015) - We do not know whether to laugh or cry, whether to toast or grieve over the statements expressed by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei, published in the Global Times on 13 March. The Global Times is the magazine of the "People's Daily", the official Chinese Communist Party newspaper.

The statement reads: "China is always sincere in improving ties with the Vatican and has been making continuing efforts to this end. We are willing to have constructive dialogue with the Vatican ... We hope the Vatican can create favorable conditions for the improving of relations". These words provoked celebration in some quarters, suffering in others. For those who greeted them with enthusiasm they represent a conciliatory sign, China's obvious desire to be engaged in dialogue with the Holy See to reach the much longed diplomatic relations.

But perhaps it is early yet to uncork the champagne. It must be said that Hong Lei spoke after the Vatican Press Office director, Fr. Federico Lombardi, had given a long interview with Phoenix TV, a Hong Kong based television station, but one closely linked to the circles of power in Beijing.

In the interview, Fr. Lombardi recalls that the Holy See is eager to reach a consensus on the issue of the ordination of bishops and suggested China consider the way in which they occur in the relations between the Vatican and Vietnam, while admitting that "China is not Vietnam". The "Vietnamese" model for episcopal ordinations is based on the Vatican choosing a name from suitable candidates and submitting it to the Government for approval. If Hanoi agrees, then the Holy See officially appoints the bishop; if Vietnam refuses, the Vatican is forced to submit another name, and so on until a consensus is reached bilaterally.

Apparently, Beijing has rejected even this model and indeed, demands that the Holy See accept at face value the format of self-election and self-appointment of bishops launched in China after Mao Zedong's rise to power: the bishops are elected and appointed by a committee made up of diocesan priests, nuns and lay people, but the name is "suggested" - in reality imposed - by the Patriotic Association. In fact, the Global Times reports this very significant sentence: "Beijing on Thursday [March 12] urged the Vatican to face [realize, or accept] the historical tradition and reality of Catholics in China, after the Vatican reportedly suggested a joint review on bishop ordination".

The versions of several optimistic commentators completely omit this sentence, which not only represents a condemnation of the "Vietnamese" method but is further affirmation that China, while willing - at least in words - to enter into dialogue with the Vatican, will not compromise on episcopal elections remaining firmly in China's hands, in the style of "self-appointed, self-election".

By omitting the above mentioned sentence, all that remains are the beautiful words of China's willingness for a "constructive dialogue with the Vatican". It would be worthwhile to weigh up these beautiful words. They are part of the made to measure statements of the Foreign Ministry spokesman. Similar phrases were used when Pope Francis, returning from South Korea, last August, sent a telegram to President Xi Jinping (v. [The declaration of Hua Chunying, spokesman for the Foreign Ministry expressed August 19](#)), or when after the papal trip to the Philippines, again expressed by Hua Chunying (reported by Xinhua January 21, 2015). In each instance the term is China "is eager to have a constructive dialogue with the Vatican."

What does this "eagerness" actually mean? My impression is that the Foreign Ministry's pre-packaged response hides an increasing embarrassment at the countless signals that both the Holy See and the Pope himself have been sending over the past several months: telegrams from Pope Francis to Xi Jinping; his words about wanting to go to Beijing "tomorrow"; his appreciation of the "noble people of China"; his desire to institute fraternal, not even necessarily "diplomatic", relations with China Added to this are the "signals" of previous popes, also full of love for the "noble Chinese people" (John Paul II and Benedict XVI); openness to dialogue with the authorities on episcopal ordinations and cooperation in society, as stated in Benedict XVI's letter to Chinese Catholics, which Francis termed [as "current" and not in the least outdated](#) (as some are prone to thinking).

Faced with all of these gestures of friendship and openness, the Foreign Ministry is groping around because it knows that by refusing relations with the Vatican, China is revealing itself to be totally out of step with history. However, there is also a fringe in China that uses Stalinism as a smoke screen and continuously threatens illicit episcopal ordinations, while rebuking the Holy See over relations with Taiwan and vindicating ecclesial autonomy which are - in the words of Benedict XVI - "incompatible with Catholic doctrine" . This fringe is part of the United Front, the Patriotic Association, the Ministry of

Religious Affairs that only a few months ago said it was planning [a number of new episcopal ordinations without papal mandate \("independent"\) for 2015.](#)

According to information from China, recently the foreign ministry in its diplomatically floral language, proposed the following to the Vatican: dialogue for diplomatic relations in exchange for the Holy See's silence about episcopal ordinations; silence about underground bishops; acceptance of bishops already ordained by the Party and those who de facto excommunicated.

In particular, the Vatican must remain silent about bishops who have been imprisoned for decades because of their fidelity to the pope, as well as those who have disappeared in police custody and are probably dead, those who the government cares so little about they refuse to even hand over their body or ashes to relatives, as is the case of [Msgr. Cosma Shi Enxiang](#). And this just as not a week goes by without Pope Francis remembering the martyrs, those who are killed "because they are Christians," those who are deprived of the freedom to express their faith. Only this week in his Angelus of March 15, he again stressed that "Christians are persecuted and the world tries to hide it."

Just how much China takes the lives of its citizens to heart is evident from one simple fact: for over a month AsiaNews has requested a meeting with the Chinese Ambassador to Italy to have some news of Msgr. Cosma Shi Enxiang. We have received no response, or reason or excuse for the delay, for example: "Right now we are too busy with the Chinese New Year" (sic); or "Right now the ambassador is very busy"; or "The communications officer is unavailable at the moment". Apparently, in China's proposal to the Holy See, the Vatican is not only invited to take the "first step" towards dialogue (it has already taken countless steps!), but to take the final step, handing the Chinese Church over to the government, in the name of the establishment of diplomatic relations.

Some bishops from China, interviewed by AsiaNews, simply say that without true religious freedom (including the freedom to meet the Pope and ordain bishops without Party influence) diplomatic relations are pointless. It would be far better to focus on enhancing the Chinese faithful in their mission in society, even going underground with ordinations, until better times for diplomatic relations. Moreover, Pope Francis himself asked his nuncios and the Curia to use their diplomacy to further the mission of the Church and not for fleeting successes to make newspaper headlines.

So does this mean that we should sit around twiddling our thumbs waiting for the future? No, there is a task that we Catholics can do right now: help the unity of the Church in China, reconciling unofficial and official communities; help the unity of these faithful with the universal Church, visiting them, supporting them, and denouncing the violence they suffer. It must be borne in mind that China long ago signed the UN Conventions on civil liberties so that, when we ask Beijing to respect religious freedom, we are asking it to do something that it has already agreed in principle. There is also plenty to do in the formation of lay people and priests, especially in assimilating the basic elements of the Church's social doctrine and ecclesiology.

There is also a job to do for China, and in particular for Xi Jinping: in his fight against corruption he needs to investigate the way in which members of the United Front, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Patriotic Association have become rich off the Church, hiding a pragmatic acumen in business and expropriation behind a smokescreen of Stalinist radicalism.

As already shown many times, [the Patriotic Association and the Ministry of Religious Affairs have seized goods and money from the Church](#) to the tune of at least 13 billion euro, which under Chinese law should be returned to its rightful owners.

Persecution in China is no longer based on ideological reasons, but in the name of greed and the idol of unjust wealth. Which is exactly what both Pope Francis and Xi Jinping condemn.

3 Zhejiang Christians released from detention

China Aid (13.03.2015) <http://www.chinaaid.org/2015/03/3-zhejiang-christians-released-from.html> - Three Christians from Wenzhou, in China's coastal Zhejiang province, were released from detention on March 6; meanwhile, two Christians from other parts of Wenzhou remain in police custody. All five were detained during the province-wide persecution campaign against Protestant and Catholic churches, in which more than 425 churches received demolition notices and, in many cases, had their crosses removed or churches destroyed.

Ou Jinsi, Ji Qingcou and Ji Qingcao, all from Yazhong Church in Taishun County, Wenzhou were released from 136-day, 62-day, and 57-day detentions, respectively.

Yazhong Church received a notice from the Yayang town Party secretary on Aug. 15, 2014, ordering the church to remove their cross by the end of August. Additionally, the town government installed three surveillance cameras at an intersection leading to the church.

The church arranged for believers, one of whom was Ou, to guard the cross day and night. Ou was detained when he attempted to prevent a government employee from dismantling the cross. Several months later, the other men were detained when they attempted to negotiate with officials. The three were charged with "gathering a crowd to disrupt public order" and "obstructing official business."

Lin, a Yazhong Church member, told China Aid that the men were acquitted of their charges and that they previously refused to sign confession statements or pay bail because they are not guilty.

"During the entire process, what the government did was illegal," he said. "We have videos that can be used as evidence. The government can't stand against such pressure. We even petitioned higher authorities; they released the detainees as a result of the pressure [the higher government exerted]. We've hired lawyers." When asked if the three released Christians planned to sue the government, Lin said they are still considering but may let go of the situation if the government doesn't take any further actions. He added that the government never successfully removed the cross.

Two other Wenzhou men are still in official custody; Pastor Huang Yizi from Fengwo Church in Pingyang County, Wenzhou and an elder from Sanjiang Church have yet to be released.

Huang was taken into custody on Aug. 3, 2014, and formally arrested on later that month for "gathering a crowd to disturb public order" after he helped Christians at Salvation Church, also in Pingyang County, defend their cross from removal by the authorities on July 21, 2014. His case was recently transferred to the Pingyang County People's Court, but his lawyer, Zhang Kai, said on Sunday that there has been no news from the court.

U.N. official calls China's crackdown on Uighurs "disturbing"

Reuters (12.03.2015) <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/03/12/uk-china-un-xinjiang-idUKKBNOM723B20150312> - A U.N. human rights investigator criticised on Wednesday [China's](#) crackdown on Muslim Uighurs in the far western region of Xinjiang, citing "disturbing stories" of harassment and intimidation against the ethnic minority.

Xinjiang has been roiled by ethnic tension between Uighurs and majority Han Chinese. Uighur groups and rights activists say the government's repressive policies in Xinjiang, including controls on Islam, have provoked unrest.

Heiner Bielefeldt, special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, told a news briefing China's actions against the Uighurs were "a major problem".

"I heard, also, very disturbing stories about harassment, for instance, intimidation during Ramadan - children in schools were expected to break their fasting on Ramadan," he said, referring to the month-long religious holiday when observant Muslims do not eat during the day.

Some Xinjiang cities have placed restrictions on Islamic dress, including the capital, Urumqi, which banned the wearing of veils in public late last year.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei, said the government paid great attention to freedom of religion and it was "baseless" to say there was any kind of repression on religious practices over important festivals.

Bielefeldt said there had been no progress on his office's request to conduct an official visit to China, which was last agreed on in 2004.

Bielefeldt also criticised China for wanting to control the reincarnation of Tibetan monks, saying Beijing was "really destroying the autonomy of religious communities, poisoning the relationship between different sub-groups, creating schisms, pitching off people against each other in order to exercise control".

His comments came two days after the Chinese-appointed governor of Tibet said the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama was profaning Buddhism by suggesting that he would not be reincarnated when he dies.

Activists have criticised China for using a campaign against militancy in Xinjiang to crack down on Uighurs. Hundreds have died in violence in recent years in predominantly Uighur parts of Xinjiang.

The government has blamed attacks in Xinjiang and elsewhere in China, including Beijing, on Islamist militants from the region. It says separatists there want to set up an independent state called East Turkestan.

On Thursday, the head of China's Supreme Court said 712 people had been sentenced last year for "separatist activities" or participating in terror attacks, up 13.3 percent on 2013.

"We will actively participate in the fight against terrorism and separatism (and) severely punish violent terrorist crimes according to the law," Chief Justice Zhou Qiang told the annual meeting of parliament.

Bielefeldt said he believed the crackdown on freedom of religion stemmed from nervousness on the part of an "authoritarian" government about people coming together "outside of official channels".

China most restrictive of religious freedom

Breitbart (27.02.2015) - <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/02/27/study-china-most-restrictive-of-religious-freedom/> In a new [report](#) by the Pew Research Center, China leads the pack of the world's 25 most populous nations in government restrictions on religion.

The study, which appraised 198 countries around the world, is based on the newest global data on religious freedom, from 2013.

According to the United States [Commission](#) on International Religious Freedom, the Chinese government "continues to perpetrate particularly severe violations of religious freedom." When the commission released its 2014 Annual Report, it once again recommended that China be designated as a "country of particular concern," based on what it termed "systematic, egregious, [ongoing abuses](#)."

The US Commission also found that since 2011, "more than 100 human rights defenders from China, many of whom often work on religious freedom cases, were forcibly disappeared, tortured, detained, stripped of legal licenses, or sentenced to prison terms."

The remarkable fact is that despite ongoing abuse, outlaw religions like Christianity continue to grow in China, with Christians now [outnumbering](#) communists in China. Though the Chinese Communist Party is the largest explicitly atheist organization in the world, with 85 million official members, it is now overshadowed by an estimated 100 million [Christians](#), a number that increases every year.

According to the new Pew report, the world situation itself is fairly dismal, with 77% of the [global population](#) living in countries with "high or very high" restrictions on religion, related to government regulation or hostility by social groups. Part of the cause of this phenomenon is the very high populations in two of the world's most notoriously restrictive countries: China and India. Populations in both of these countries exceed one billion people, and each of these nations is among the most hostile toward religious minorities.

The religion to face the greatest level of persecution worldwide is Christianity. "Christians were harassed," the study found, "either by government or social groups, in 102 of the 198 countries included in the study," which equates to 52% of the countries analyzed, more than any other religious group.

Jewish populations are also experiencing a rise in harassment, with hostilities toward Jews, either by government or social groups, happening in 77 countries, or 39% of the 198 countries evaluated. The Pew Research Center has been carrying out this study for the last seven consecutive years, and in that period harassment of Jews reached a seven-year high in 2013. The report also found that Jews are "much more likely to be harassed by individuals or groups in society than by governments." In the case of Europe, Jews experienced harassment by individuals or social groups in 34 of the region's 45 countries, or just over three quarters of European nations.

Among the regions of the world, the Middle East stands out as the area with the highest level of both government restrictions and social hostilities involving religion. Syria, Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia all have "very high restrictions in one of the two categories," the study found.

The Pew Research Center's latest report on global restrictions on religion "ranks 198 countries and territories by their levels of government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion." Among the countries evaluated, North Korea is conspicuous by its absence. Although sources indicate that "North Korea's government is among the most repressive in the world, including toward religion," the Pew Center chose to leave the country out of the study because "independent observers lack regular access to the country." This means that it is difficult, if not impossible, "to provide the kind of specific, timely information that formed the basis of this analysis."

Tibet, thousands of Buddhists celebrate the Dalai Lama's birthday in public

Asia News (23.02.2015) - Thousands of Tibetan Buddhist faithful braved the communist authorities and gathered in public to celebrate the 80th birthday of the Dalai Lama. The inhabitants of the rural districts of Ngaba and Golok have exploited the festivities of the Lunar New Year, which began on February 19, to wish long life to their spiritual leader.

The faithful set up a life-sized cutout of the Tibetan leader Ocean of wisdom - the literal meaning of the term "Dalai Lama" - sitting on the traditional throne. Soon after they queued in front of the photograph, bowed and laid ritual gifts. According to the Western calendar the XIV Dalai Lama - Tenzin Gyatso - was born July 6, 1935, but in the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism the 80th birthday of a teacher are celebrated with the arrival of the New Lunar Year of their 80th year.

A video obtained by *Phayul* website shows some Buddhists waving prayer flags in front of the portrait of the Dalai Lama and throw pieces of paper with the Buddhist mantra [see photo].

According to the newspaper, linked to the Tibetan government in exile, at least 3 thousand people attended the ceremony to express "loyalty and reverence" towards the Nobel Peace Laureate, who has lived in exile in India since 1959.

So far the local government has not reacted. Beijing calls the Dalai Lama "a wolf in monks robes" and accuses him and the Tibetan government in exile of wanting to "divide the country."

In fact the Buddhist leader has not sought greater independence for Tibet but only religious and cultural autonomy. The territory was annexed by Maoist troops in 1949 and according to the central government, there is a "clique loyal to the wolf" that operates even within communist structures towards independence.

In an attempt to "wipe out" this clique, in 2014, the Disciplinary Committee of the Communist Party of Tibet **charged 15 senior and 240 other middle and lower level officials**. It has also tightened controls and restrictions on the local population. In protest against the current situation, since the end of 2009 at least 136 Tibetans have set themselves on fire in public.

Timeline on church demolitions in China shows pattern of attacks on Christians

Christian Daily (18.02.2015)

<http://www.christiandaily.com/article/timeline.on.church.demolitions.in.china.shows.pattern.of.attacks.on.christians/49858.htm> - International organization Christian Solidarity Worldwide has released an interactive timeline that documents more than 400 reports of churches and crosses that have been demolished in the nation. The group notes a pattern of church attacks in 2014, fueling suspicions that the Chinese government has been looking to curb the nation's growing Christian faith.

According to the [timeline](#), the Zhejiang provincial government in China launched a campaign called "Three Rectifications and One Demolition" in 2013. This campaign was designed to demolish "illegal structures which violate law and regulations relating to land management and urban and rural planning."

"Although the Chinese government claims that the church demolitions have nothing to do with religion, the scope of the demolitions indicated by the timeline tells a different story. The unease felt by Christians in the province and elsewhere in the country is also very real," CSW Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said in a [statement](#).

The timeline shows that at least 400 crosses from churches in China's Zhejiang province have been removed and 35 churches were partially or completely demolished. The majority of these incidents took place between April and July 2014, many in the Wenzhou province which is also referred to as "China's Jerusalem."

According to the report, some believe that the Chinese government's campaign was designed to pressure Christian groups and churches to register with the government. However, government registered churches are reported to be tightly regulated within the communist nation. In China, only religious groups that are registered with the government can freely worship.

Based on the timeline, CSW is hoping the Chinese government will pull back its efforts to demolish Christian churches and institutions.

"We renew our call for the Chinese authorities to make consistent efforts to enter into dialogue with religious leaders, with a view to promoting mutual trust and positive relations; to provide clear instructions about the process of applying for permission to build a religious structure; and to establish a complaints mechanism for religious buildings which have been refused permission to build," Thomas concluded.

Beijing hides the body of bishop Cosma Shi Enxiang: too "dangerous"

Asia News (09.02.2015) - Very "dangerous." Very "worrying": This is how Hebei Catholics comment on the attitude of the Beijing authorities surrounding the death of Bishop Cosma Shi Enxiang, ascertained on 30 January, but retracted a few days ago. The family

of the prelate - who disappeared in police custody in April 2001 - are still waiting to be handed over his body or at least his ashes.

Msgr. Shi, 93, underground bishop of Yixian (Hebei) was arrested April 13, 2001, a Friday, in the home of his niece in Beijing and held in an unknown location without trial or charge. In all these years family members regularly asked authorities for some news of their relative, but they never got any response. On January 30, an employee of the city of Baoding, the village chief of Shizhuang, questioned again by family, let slip that the bishop had died.

Speaking to UCANews agency, the niece of the bishop, Shi Chunyan, said: " We are now waiting for the prelate, whether it be his body or ashes, to be returned to Shizhuang, our hometown, before we decide what to do next." To date, however, the corpse of the bishop has not been handed over.

Meanwhile, across China news of the death of Msgr. Shi Enxiang has spread, mourned as a "martyr" and as "a saint", who has spent more than half his life in prison because of his fidelity to the Catholic faith and to his bond with the Pope. The Catholics of Yixian had been discussing how to organize the funeral which would have been attended by thousands of people across the country.

Then, there was a turn of events a few days ago. Since there seemed to be a delay in the return of the corpse (or ashes) of the bishop, the family members of the deceased went to find out more from the Baoding council, which replied that it knew nothing about the death of Msgr. Shi and that "the village mayor [who broke the news of the death] was drunk, or heard or understand wrong".

Bishops, deaths and torture

The authorities "denial" of Msgr. Shi's death, together with the hijacking of his corpse, have led Catholics to a series of assumptions. The most accepted one is that the government is afraid of the faithful's reaction to the death of a bishop during 14 years of unmotivated imprisonment, since there was no trial or judgment.

Over the years, other underground bishops - not recognized by the government - have suffered the same fate as Msgr. Shi.

In 2005, [Msgr. John Gao Kexian, Bishop of Yantai \(Shandong\) died after five years of detention in police custody](#). Family members were denied an autopsy on the corpse, to know the cause of death because the bishop was immediately cremated and buried, without the participation of family members or of the faithful. Again, the rumors about the death of the bishop circulated for months until they were confirmed.

In 2007, [Msgr. John Han Dingxian, Bishop of Yongnian \(Hebei\)](#), died after two years of isolation in the hands of the police. Again the family were denied an autopsy because a few hours after the announced death, the bishop was cremated and the ashes buried in a public cemetery, without any religious ceremony.

The faithful fear that Msgr. Shi, now very old, died of starvation or torture, as is suspected for the deaths of all these underground bishops.

The faithful recall the case of Msgr. Liu Difen, underground bishop of Anguo (Hebei), who died in 1992, after a period spent in prison. Police had warned the family to go to visit him at the hospital because the bishop was "very sick". Immediately after the visit, the bishop died. His body was returned to relatives and these, preparing the body for the

funeral, realized that the body of the bishop had "two holes in his back, be enough to fit your finger: a sign that he had been tortured."

However the most similar case to that of Msgr. Cosma Shi Enxiang is the story of Msgr. Joseph Fan Xueyan, bishop of Baoding (Hebei). Arrested for a few months in 1992, his body was returned to the family, left on the doorstep of their home, wrapped in a plastic bag. The body of the elderly prelate showed signs of torture around his neck (perhaps a wire that choked him) and several large bruises to his chest, forehead and legs.

Msgr. Fan had spent nearly 30 years in prison for his stubborn refusal to join the Patriotic Association which meant breaking his bond with the Pope. His funeral was attended by thousands of faithful. Despite the deployment of many soldiers to maintain order and control, the faithful publicly protested calling for an investigation into the death of Msgr. Fan and demanding the perpetrators of his torture and death be brought to justice.

China's fears

For Baoding faithful, the authorities' reluctance to confess the death of Msgr. Shi hides their fear that something could happen similar to the events at the funeral of Msgr. Fan.

Another incident confirms the authorities' concern for possible threats to order and security. Just a day before the release of the news of the death of Msgr. Shi, Yu Zhengsheng, Politburo "number four" arrived in Baoding, chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

According to *Xinhua*, he making an inspection of "the situation of religions." In fact he only met members of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, along with Hebei Catholic personalities and bishops. A local Catholic points out that "it is the first time that such a high level official has ever visited a small place like Baoding." In all likelihood - he continued - "the leaders are concerned about the political stability and security", which could be shaken by the news of the death of the bishop.

Above all authorities fear the bad press that would be generated by news that a Catholic bishop died in police custody, just as they attempt to take the "higher moral ground" in the fight against corruption and the misdeeds of the members of party. On the other hand, as some of the faithful of Yixian point out, if they handed over the deceased prelate's body or the ashes it would be the first time in 14 years that China would admit it he had seized Msgr. Shi, after denying any knowledge of his fate for years.

Who is Msgr. Cosma Shi Enxiang

Msgr. Shi was born April 17, 1922 in Shizhuang (Hebei). On 14 August 1947 he was ordained a priest in the Apostolic Prefecture of Yixian, two years after Mao Zedong took power and began to implement a policy of control of the Church, emphasizing the urgent need for all Catholics to express their patriotism, becoming independent from the rest Church and breaking bonds with the pontiff. Fr. Shi, was arrested for the first time in 1954 because of his stubborn fidelity to the Pope. In 1957 he was sentenced to hard labor in the freezing region of Heilongjiang first, then in the coal mines in Shanxi. Released in 1980, he dedicated his life to evangelization and supporting the faithful in Hebei.

On 24 June 1982, Msgr. Zhou Fangji consecrated him bishop in secret and his clandestine episcopal ministry began. In 1987 he was arrested and placed under house arrest for two years.

In 1989, there were hopes for a new opening in society and in the Church in China. But

the Tiananmen massacre in June dealt them a cruel blow. The underground bishops, who on 21 November of that year had formed a bishops' conference, were all arrested along with many priests. They included Msgr. Cosma Shi. Within a few weeks five bishops and 14 priests were swallowed up by the regime's prison system, released only in 1993, thanks to an international pressure campaign. On 13 April 2001, the bishop was arrested again and disappeared into thin air. Up until now when the news of his death spread like wildfire only to be later denied. Where he died, how and when will remain a mystery that only the Chinese Communist Party knows.

A Yixian faithful told AsiaNews: "We just want his body or his ashes, and we want to give a proper burial to this martyr of the faith", who spent 54 years (more than half of his life) in prison. But in China the dead are as frightening as the living, if not even more so.

Some arrests of Falun Gong practitioners among innumerable cases in January

HRWF (09.02.2015) - According to Minghui.org <http://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2015/2/8/148275.html>, quite a number of Falun Gong practitioners were arrested in China in January.

1. [Beijing] Five Practitioners Sentenced

The following practitioners held at the Daxing District Detention Center in Beijing were recently sentenced.

Ms. Zhang Yuhua: 4-year term, Ms. Meng Jiyong: 4-year term, Ms. Zhang Shuhui: 3.5-year term, Ms. Meng Zhanrong: 3-year term, and Ms. Wang Xiaoping: 3-year prison term. Ms. Zhang Yuhua was taken to the Qianjin Prison of the Qinghe Farm in Tianjin. Ms. Meng Zhanrong, Ms. Zhang Shuhui, and Ms. Wang Xiaoping were transferred to a prison on January 12, 2015.

2. [Tianjin] Mr. Liu Lijian Detained

Mr. Liu Lijian was arrested by officers from the Meichang Police Station on January 23, 2015. He is being held at the Wuqing Detention Center.

Li Shui, director of the Meichang Police Station: +86-13920970588 (Mobile)

3. [Lanzhou City, Gansu Province] Mr. Lu Yunfei Detained

Mr. Lu Yunfei was arrested at work on the morning of January 20, 2015, by officers from the Domestic Security Division of the Chengguan District Police Department in Lanzhou City. He is being held at the Xiguoyuan Detention Center.

Mr. Lu had previously been held at the same detention center, following an arrest in March 2014. There, he developed stomach perforation and a critical physical condition due to mistreatment. After his family repeatedly requested his release, he was later released on bail and hospitalized.

He was detained there again before he had a chance to fully recover.

4. [Jilin City, Jilin Province] Mr. Han Yongqiang and Ms. Wei Xiujuan Persecuted

Mr. Han Yongqiang and Ms. Wei Xiujuan were arrested by officers from the Jilin City Domestic Security Division and the Changjiangjie Police Station on August 1, 2014. The police ransacked their home and took them to the Shahezi Brainwashing Center.

They were subject to physical and mental persecution for six days at the brainwashing center, then transferred to the Jilin City Detention Center. Due to mistreatment, Ms. Wei had difficulty walking and lost consciousness multiple times. She was later released on bail.

Mr. Han, still being held, was recently taken to the Gaoxin District Court.

Parties involved in persecuting Mr. Han and Ms. Wei: Wang Bin, deputy judge of the Criminal Court: +86-432-63070931 (Office) Li Ying: +86-432-63070931 (Office) Ma Ying: +86-432-63070922 (Office) Wang Yujing, clerk: +86-432-63070909 (Office)

5. [Shouguang City, Shandong Province] Ten Practitioners Detained

Several practitioners in Shouguang City were arrested on January 17, 2015. Among them, Ms. Sang Ping and Ms. Li Hong are being held at the Shouguang Brainwashing Center, and Mr. Zhang Baogui, Ms. Fu Lianhua, Ms. Sun Meixiu, Zhang (gender unknown) from Majiazhuang, Mr. Nan Xiaofu, Mr. Zhu Xiangkuan, Ms. Wang Yueling, and Ms. Li Aiju, were taken to the Shouguang Detention Center.

Parties involved in persecuting the ten practitioners: Qiu Chunjun, director of the Shengcheng Police Station: +86-536-5262272 (Office), +86-13906464917 (Mobile) Wu Zhenping, director of the 610 Office: +86-536-5260610 (Office), +86-536-5221395 (Office), +86-13583608371 (Mobile) Tian Qingchun, deputy director of the 610 Office: +86-13615365118 (Mobile) Zhang Hongwei, captain of the Domestic Security Division: +86-536-5298766 (Office), +86-536-5298300 (Office), +86-13563633999 (Mobile) Wang Shuai, director of the Shouguang Brainwashing Center: +86-536-5190306 (Office), +86-13853638306 (Mobile)

6. [Leling City, Shandong Province] Three Practitioners Arrested

Mr. Zhang Jinhai, his wife Ms. Zhang Jinfang, and Ms. Gong were arrested at Mr. Zhang's store on the morning of January 22, 2015, by officers from the Domestic Security Division of the Leling City Police Department. The police took pictures of Mr. Zhang's store and ransacked it. They confiscated Falun Gong books and other items. The three practitioners were taken to the Leling City Domestic Security Division.

7. [Rizhao City, Shandong Province] Ms. Gao Xiuhua Arrested

Ms. Gao Xiuhua was arrested on December 16, 2014. She was held in the Rizhao City Detention Center. This was the fourth time she was arrested since the persecution started in July 1999.

Parties involved in the persecution: Rizhao City Detention Center: +86-633-8289719, +86-633-8253947 Rizhao City 610 Office: +86-633-8788610 Li Yeming, head of the Domestic Security Division: +86-633-3667087, +86-633-2291606, +86-13606332919

8. [Pingyuan County, Shandong Province] Ms. Yan Hongyan Arrested

Officers from the Pingyuan County 610 Office went to Ms. Yan Hongyan's home on the afternoon of January 14, 2015. They pounded on her door but failed to break in. They found her at her mother-in-law's home and arrested her.

To avoid being arrested, Ms. Yan stayed away from her home until January 13, 2015. She was arrested the following day.

Parties involved in persecuting Ms. Yan: Zhang Zhenyi, head of the Domestic Security Division: +86-534-4256967, +86-15864178988, +86-534-4212336 Li Feng, head of the 610 Office: +86-534-4256967, +86-15864178589, +86-534-4217698

9. [Luchuan County, Guangxi Province] Ms. Xie Huijuan and Ms. Zhu Xiaolan Detained

Ms. Xie Huijuan and Ms. Zhu Xiaolan was arrested by officers from the Michang Town Police Station for distributing Falun Gong materials in the town on January 15, 2015. Both practitioners are being held in the County Detention Center.

Parties involved in persecuting them: Zhong Jiawu, director of the Michang Town Police Station: +86-13977538189, +86-775-7027242 Luchuan County Detention Center: +86-775-7222044

See more information about these and other cases at

<http://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2015/2/8/148275.html>

<http://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2015/2/5/148235.html>

<http://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2015/2/4/148222.html>

Keep informed about the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners in China: <http://en.minghui.org/cc/10/>

China's Communist Party bans believers, doubles down on atheism

Huffington Post (02.02.2015) - http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/02/china-communist-party-atheism-zhejiang-ban-religious-members-christianity_n_6599722.html?ct=t%2810/30/14%29 Karl Marx long ago disparaged religion as "the opiate of the people," and now the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wants to ban all addicts. The Communist leadership of coastal Zhejiang province has declared it will double down on a long-standing but little-enforced rule that [bars religious believers](#) from joining the Party.

That move comes amid a widely reported tightening of the ideological screws in Chinese universities and across the media landscape. Professors across the country have reportedly been [fired](#) for speaking against the Communist Party, and the country's education minister [declared last week](#) that China should "never let textbooks promoting Western values appear in our classes."

December also saw scattered protests by Chinese students [demanding an end to Christmas celebrations](#) on Chinese campuses, a move supported by authorities in one Zhejiang city. One professor at a Party-affiliated university speculated that the recent moves to bar believers from joining the Party are meant to [guard against](#) "penetration of Western hostile forces," according to a Global Times report.

Last week's declaration from Zhejiang province's party committee called for CCP groups to organize activities where members [disavow religious belief](#). It also stated that all applicants to the Party must first be screened for evidence of religious faith or participation, and rejected if any such evidence is found. Party ideology is rooted in Marxist-Leninist thought, which decries religion as a delusion that distracts the oppressed masses from demanding their fair share.

Religious believers have long been technically barred from joining the CCP, but the prohibition was only loosely enforced. The CCP has more than 84 million members, many of whom entered the Party during school and have little if any political involvement. Entrance is competitive, and membership often serves more as a bullet point on a resume than a declaration of political or religious fealty.

If actually carried out, the restrictions would exclude participants in an ongoing [religious revival](#) from joining the country's ruling party. Christianity has seen tremendous growth in China in recent years, and some reports point to a growing official acceptance and even encouragement of religious belief.

But Party propaganda has also taken a hard line against the influence of ideas and values perceived as being foreign to China. So-called "Western values" like freedom of speech and multiparty democracy have been denigrated by leaders and state-controlled media, and religions such as Christianity have also been caught in the crosshairs. The Zhejiang city of Wenzhou is home to a large number of Christian churches, more than 200 of which have been [targeted for demolition](#) in the past year after being classified as "illegal structures." Wenzhou also made headlines by reportedly [banning Christmas celebrations](#) in schools this year.

China recognizes five "official" religions -- Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism -- but many believers who worship outside of state-sanctioned institutions are subject to periodic crackdowns. Buddhism and Taoism have received far greater official support due to their deep roots in Chinese culture, but during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and '70s, even these religions saw their temples ransacked and desecrated as relics of "superstitious" and "feudal" thinking.

Communist party bans believers in province of 'China's Jerusalem'

The Guardian (02.02.2015) - Officials in Zhejiang province, south-east China, will reinforce a ban on admitting new Communist party members who practise religion, suggesting that a protracted crackdown on Christianity in the province will continue.

Last year, Zhejiang officials cracked down on churches Wenzhou, often called "China's Jerusalem" for its reputation as a religious stronghold and where about an eighth of 8 million residents are Christian, according to state media.

Government-backed demolition crews forced hundreds of churches to remove prominently placed crosses, despite elaborate protests and sit-ins by congregants. Some of the buildings were branded "illegal structures" and demolished entirely.

Zhejiang authorities made the announcement on Friday, and the state-run Global Times newspaper reported them late on Sunday night.

"Party members are banned from joining religions. Believing in communism and atheism is a basic requirement to become a party member," Li Yunlong, a professor at the Party School of the Communist party of China central committee, told the newspaper. "This could be a part of efforts against the penetration of western hostile forces."

While the Communist party considers itself an atheist organisation, authorities recognise five "official" religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, and Taoism. Party members have long been banned from openly embracing any faith – they are encouraged to hold Marxism as their highest ideal.

Yet the Zhejiang authorities stressed that a pre-screening examination for aspiring party members "should be improved and implemented", according to the Global Times, suggesting that the policy is unevenly enforced.

The newspaper added that party members in the province would be subjected to a Marxist education campaign and "need to submit a written promise rejecting religion beliefs".

In December, Wenzhou banned schools from holding Christmas-related events, according to state media reports. Local officials "hope schools can pay more attention to Chinese traditional festivals instead of western traditions", the Global Times reported.

Liangren Church elder sends letter to church from prison

China Aid (29.01.2015) - <http://www.chinaaid.org/2015/01/liangren-church-elder-sends-letter-to.html> A detained church elder in China's southern Guangxi allowed China Aid to publish a letter, below, that he wrote to his fellow church members regarding his seven-month imprisonment on Jan. 15.

Huang Qirui was detained by Liuzhou police from his home in Guangzhou, Guangdong, on June 24, 2014, for "illegal business operations." Huang is alleged to have been in charge of shipping textbooks published by the Hualin Foreign Language Experimental Kindergarten of Liuzhou, which was established by Liangren Church of Guangzhou, where Huang is a church elder.

[Huang is one of four detainees](#) who is currently being tried for his involvement with the character-improvement books compiled by the church, which authorities claim are illegal.
Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Peace be with you!

I'm Huang Qirui, an elder at Liangren Church; let me give my sincere greeting to all of you in the Lord Jesus Christ. May our supreme father endow you with grace and peace.

I miss you very much and I remember you all in my daily prayers. On every Sunday, my heart is with you, and together we worship the lamb who sits on the throne.

Be thankful for the blessings from our heavenly father who endows you with confidence, hope, and a loving heart that make you stand firm with the help of the Lord.

"We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end." (Hebrews 3:14)

"...And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory." (Hebrews 3:6)

In the house of God, there is a group of people who continuously have conviction. In the house of God, there is a group of people with confidence and hope. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, you are such a group of people!

May God bless you!

My dear brothers and sisters, I miss so much: You are my joy and my royal crown. Amen!

At the end of June last year, I suddenly was forced to leave you all. Little did I know that I would still not go back to you after seven months had passed. Starting at the end of the first month, I thought I should be able to go back to you. However, the fact I'm facing is disappointing. On every day and night in these past seven months, I've felt as if I were taking a walk with a snail and time were elapsing very slowly. However, I've felt an urgency in my heart to see you all. May God show mercy to me and let me be released as soon as possible.

From the appearance, it seems that I was arrested this time because I participated in the publishing of an illegal religious publication. However, the police found later that they don't have sufficient evidence to support this charge, and there is no way they can prove I have violated the law. Now, I've come to see more and more clearly the intention of the law enforcement agency. They want to use this opportunity to undermine my church life and my ministry. I have already written my defense opinions. Tomorrow, I will argue based on reason in court in the hope that I can be acquitted and released thanks to the "rule of the country according to law," which is expounded these days.

In the past decades, persecution incidents in China like this are not new. Spiritually speaking, it's an attack by the devil against the church and is a popular trick used by Satan.

Certainly, suffering is beneficial to me! God is testing me and molding me through tribulation. He wants to mold me into a useful instrument. I have learned many lessons in this tribulation. Wait until I am released so that I can share with you one lesson after another. In 2014, the vision of Liangren Church was a year of growth. Some people have grown and others have been grown. I belong to the latter. The vision I have for 2015 is to "follow the Lord." Let me share this vision with you. If you are moved, you can also regard this as your vision.

Jesus said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it." (Luke 9:23-24). I think a true follower must sacrifice himself or herself, do it every day, and carry the cross. I advise you to work with me and learn to be a true Jesus follower. Therefore, we should exhibit "mutual affection... For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 3:7-8) For if you exhibit love for our fellow people, "you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 3:11)

Implore God to increase His blessings so that more people are selected to go and serve the Lord and share the ministry in the church. Please also pray for me so that I can go back to you as soon as possible.

May our heavenly father's love, Christ's grace, and the moving of the Holy Spirit be with you! Amen!

Recently, the hymns I often sing are "The Lord, I'm in Front of You," "Molding Me," "The Conveyer of Cross," and "I Don't Leave or Abandon Your Love." I hope you also like them.

Sichuan police raid gathering of house church members, detain 9

China Aid (23.01.2015) <http://www.chinaaid.org/2015/01/sichuan-police-raid-gathering-of-house.html> - A house church gathering of more than 70 Christians in China's southwestern Sichuan province was raided by police officers on Tuesday, and more than 20 people were taken into custody, among which were two pastors and two missionaries.

More than 70 Christians from various places gathered at a meeting held by Langzhong House Church in Langzhong, Nanchong at 9 a.m. on Tuesday at a place called the Bamboo Mountain Villa. The meeting was for local house church representatives to discuss how to overcome their estrangements with each other.

At 10:30 a.m., dozens of plainclothes officers from the local public security bureau and police station raided the meeting, dispersing the worshippers and detaining more than 20 for attending an "illegal assembly."

"A total of nine people have been [placed under administrative detention]," said Pastor Zhang Mingxuan, president of the Chinese House Church Alliance. "Five of them, including Pastor Li Ming, [one of Langzhong House Church's leaders], have been sentenced to 15 days. The four others were sentenced to 10-days administrative detention. The other 14 who were initially detained have been released."

Others still held at the Shaxi Township Police Station in Langzhong include Pastor Li Mingbo, another Langzhong House Church leader, Pastor Liu Yong, from a house church in Chengdu, a Langzhong Church elder named Wang, Pastor Sun and his wife, Ma Ying, the two missionaries from Mianyang, and three Langzhong Church members: Zhou Chunyan, Chen Yihui, and Liang Renyan.

"Their cell phones were all confiscated," one worshipper said. "Finally they gave a cell phone to one of the church members who called me. I said I had already come back home and asked him where he was. He said he was still at the police station. He said he hadn't been released and explained how he had been able to call me."

When China Aid's Hong Kong-based reporter called the Shaxi Police Station to ask about the incident, he was told that the "public security bureau is investigating this incident. If you want an answer, you can go to our public security bureau for inquiries."

[A Langzhong House Church gathering was raided on Dec. 24, 2014](#), while a group of Christians prepared for a Christmas celebration the next day. Three church members were placed under administrative detention and have since been released.

China Aid's top 10 persecution cases in China of 2014

China Aid (09.01.2015) <http://www.chinaaid.org/2015/01/china-aids-top-10-persecution-cases-in.html> - In 2014, Chinese authorities in charge of religious affairs persecuted the entire Christian population in China in order to "sinicize Christianity." In addition to house churches, which typically face persecution, small government-sanctioned churches were also targeted, experiencing cross removals and building demolitions. The persecution against Christianity seemed to aim to eliminate the social influence of the Christian community and to correct and transform Christianity to fit the "Chinese Dream." During 2014, cases in which the Chinese Communist regime persecuted Christians came out in rapid succession with each case worse than the previous one. Circumstances surrounding the trampling of Christians' religious freedom in these cases were vicious in most instances and have caused a very bad impact. These cases have drawn extensive attention and condemnation from the international community. Among persecution cases in 2014, the top 10 are as follows:

1. Demolition of Sanjiang Church in Wenzhou, Zhejiang

On April 28, 2014, more than 1,000 armed police officers and government-hired thugs forcibly [demolished Sanjiang Church](#) in Wenzhou, Zhejiang. This attack, which is perhaps the most vicious, was part of a province-wide campaign to remove crosses and demolish church buildings that began in early 2014. [According to the most recent statistics published on Dec. 12, 2014, more than 425 churches in Zhejiang](#) have been targeted by the campaign; however, that number is speculated to be much higher due to the probability of unreported attacks. External estimates claim that as many as one-quarter of Zhejiang churches had the crosses topping their buildings removed in 2014. Two days after the demolition of Sanjiang Church, which cost believers more than 30 million Yuan (U.S. \$4.8 million) and accommodated several thousand believers, pastors from American and Chinese churches, a China Aid representative, representatives from the Overseas Pastors of House Churches of China organization, and local Christians [presented a letter](#) that condemned the demolition to officials at the Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles.

2. Zhejiang government demolishes Wenzhou church's cross, injuring more than a dozen

In Wenzhou, Zhejiang, more than 600 uniformed government-hired individuals in fire trucks, ambulances and other vehicles stormed Pingyang County's Salvation Church during the early morning of July 21, 2014, [severely injuring 14 church members](#) who were guarding the church. During the resulting confrontation, the crowd beat Christians with clubs. Many church members called emergency numbers, seeking police assistance, but local police refused to send officers to the scene. The government employees were unsuccessful in their attempt to remove the cross; however, they returned on [Aug. 14, 2014, and succeeded in their task](#).

Several Salvation Church members, including one of the church's pastors [Huang Yizi](#), were detained during the series of persecution against the church. Human rights lawyers are currently working together to defend Huang.

3. Zhejiang demolition campaign affects churches in Wenzhou, Ningbo, Hangzhou and other cities

In addition to the demolition of Sanjiang Church's building and Salvation Church's cross, [more than 420 other churches](#) in Zhejiang were targeted by the provincial government's

“Three Rectifications and One Demolition” campaign. Some say that this bout of persecution against house churches and the province’s smaller Three-Self Patriotic Movement churches constitutes the most serious persecution of churches since the Cultural Revolution of the 1960-70s. According to [internal government documents](#) uncovered by China Aid, the purpose of the campaign is to “[correct the phenomena that religion has grown too fast.](#)”

The campaign has caused a large number of violent conflicts, leaving many worshippers injured. For example, on [July 28, 2014, Wenzhou authorities removed Huaiyen Hall’s cross](#). More than 200 police officers and demolition experts arrived at the church around 3 a.m. with cranes, fire trucks and ambulances, successfully overpowered the more than 200 worshippers who guarded the church, and demolished the cross.

4. Henan authorities heavily persecute Three-Self Patriotic Movement church; pastor serving 12-year sentence

On [July 4, 2014, Pastor Zhang Shaojie](#) of the Nanle County Christian Church in Puyang, Henan, was [dispute with the church over a portion of land](#) promised to Nanle County Christian Church by the county’s previous leaders. sentenced to 12 years in prison for

The church has been continuously persecuted since November 2013. While most of the detained believers have been released, [Li Cairen](#), the woman officials claim is the victim of Zhang’s fraud, has been missing in police custody since Dec. 21, 2013, when she visited Pastor Zhang’s family. Other church members, including the pastor’s younger daughter, [Zhang “Shanshan” Lingxin, have been detained in black jails](#) for short periods.

When human rights lawyers formed a delegation to defend the Christians, they also [faced opposition](#) in the form of intimidation, threats of having their law licenses revoked, and [beatings](#). In the meantime, the government began trying to stop worshippers from gathering at the church by repeatedly claiming it was condemned. Finally, on Dec. 18, 2014, the local government succeeded in their mission to shut down the church and [removed the cross topping the main hall](#). Around the same time, the government withdrew around 4 million Yuan (U.S. \$643,000) from the church’s bank account.

With China Aid’s help, Pastor Zhang’s older daughter, Huixin “Esther” Zhang, [escaped from China](#) in July 2014 with her husband and their young daughter. Pastor Zhang’s lawyers are currently petitioning to get his sentence overturned.

5. Guangxi government persecutes kindergarten founded by Guangdong house church; 4 people in custody

On Feb. 18, 2014, Liuzhou Domestic Security Protection Squad agents [placed two women from the Hualin Foreign Language Experimental Kindergarten in Guangxi under criminal detention](#) for “illegal business operations.” Authorities claimed that a textbook that teaches character cultivation, which was compiled by the kindergarten’s founding church, the Guangzhou, Guangdong-based Liangren Church, qualified as part of illegal business operations because it was self-published. Days later, lawyers for Cheng Jie, the kindergarten’s director, and Mo Xiliu, a teacher also in charge of logistics, determined that the [charges were baseless](#) because no profit was being made from the books nor where they available for use outside the school. Mo was later released on bail.

Late at night [on June 23](#), officers from Guangxi’s Liuzhou Domestic Security Protection Squad arrived in Guangzhou, Guangdong and forced their way into the home of Liangren Church member Li Jiatao, who was home alone with her two young children. Officers detained Li, whose husband, Liangren Church missionary Ma Jiawen, was in Hong Kong. The same night, officers also detained church elder Huang Quirui and Fang Bin, a local

who had helped the church print the textbooks. The three were also charged with “illegal business operations.”

The Procuratorate [filed the case](#) against Cheng, Li, Huang and Fang on Nov. 9, 2014, and the trial was slated to [begin in December 2014](#). The court alleges that the latter three defendants played a role in printing the books and selling and distributing them to other schools. However, lawyers for the group contend that while a small fee was charged to students to cover the costs of printing the books, no profit was made from the distribution of the books nor were the books ever used outside of Hualin Kindergarten.

After “failing inspection” in August and despite disagreement over the inspection from the school’s leaders and lawyers, the school [began the process of closing its doors](#).

6. Guangdong house churches persecuted as cults following McDonald’s murder by alleged cult members

The Chinese government issued a list of “cults” that included many orthodox Christian groups after an incident in May 2014, in which members of the Church of the Almighty God, which the Chinese government has deemed a cult, attacked and killed a woman who rebuffed the group’s attempt to recruit her. This list led to the persecution of many house churches that local authorities claimed were cults, including at least eight in Guangzhou, Guangdong, and at least two in Foshan, Guangdong.

On Sept. 21, 2014, in Foshan, Fangzhou Church and Olive House Church were both raided by police during their Sunday services. Many church members were detained, and [six were placed under criminal detention](#) for “suspicion of utilizing superstitious organizations and superstition to undermine the implementation of the law.”

7. Group of Beijing Christians detained for “holding an illegal assembly” during visit to sick church member

[Fifteen Christians from a larger group were detained](#) on Jan. 24, 2014, when they visited Zhang Wenhe, another Holy Love Fellowship church member who was sick. The detainees were taken to Liyuan Police Station in Tongzhou District, Beijing for “holding an illegal assembly.” Between Jan. 25-26, police sent a father and son from the group back to their home in Tianjin while the remaining 13 worshippers were placed under criminal detention.

All the detainees were [released](#) within a month of being detained; however, the church’s elder Xu Yonghai proceeded to submit an application for state compensation on Oct. 2, 2014, which was rejected by the Tongzhou Public Security Bureau in December 2014. Xu plans to file an administrative reconsideration to the Beijing Public Security Bureau. Xu said that Holy Love Fellowship consists mainly of petitioners from other towns living in Beijing until they achieve the desired results of their various cases.

8. Shandong believers accused of being cult members

A group of 22 Christians from a Cao County, Heze, Shandong, were practicing hymns in a church member’s factory when more than 50 police officers raided the gathering and [took everyone into custody on June 25, 2014](#). After releasing three worshippers along with their young children and one pregnant woman, [police formally detained 12 of the Christians](#).

Police released all the Christians on June 23, 2014, except for [Zhao Weiliang and Cheng Hongpeng](#) whose arrests were formally approved on Aug. 1, 2014.

9. Church-founded schools throughout China face persecution in 2014

Authorities in China didn't focus their persecution solely on churches in 2014; church-affiliated schools and Sunday schools were also harassed. While a persecution campaign caused damage to more than [420 churches](#) in Zhejiang (see no. 3), churches were also ordered to stop Sunday school services for minors.

Additionally, [two schools founded by the Guangzhou-based Liangren Church](#) were shut down after the schools "failed to pass inspection" for various reasons that school officials claim were fabricated. Hualin Language Experimental Kindergarten (see no. 5) in Liuzhou began closing its doors in August 2014 after officials released a notice that "disqualified" school administrators from running the school.

The other Liangren Church-founded school, Wisdom Heart Kindergarten in Wanning, Hainan, which was home to more than 100 "left behind" children of migrant workers, was shut down by authorities on July 26, 2014.

On Aug. 31, the day before the school year started, [authorities in Fuyang, Anhui, ordered a private, Christian-founded school to close](#); however, teachers and students proceeded to show up to Shunchang School the next day. Later, the school was demolished and its principal went missing.

Finally, a faith-based boarding school for orphans in Beijing called [Angel Orphanage was shut down](#) during early October when officials refused to issue a certificate that stated the school had passed its annual inspection, leaving teachers and their approximately 30 students, cared for by extended family members after their parents' passing, searching for a new location in Shanxi.

10. Xinjiang house churches raided; non-Chinese deported

House church Christians in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region faced serious persecution in 2014. On March 5, 2014, police raided a gathering of several dozen worshippers in Yili, Xinjiang and placed two Christians under a 15-day administrative detention.

In May, [two women were summoned to a local police station](#) where they were detained for the better part of a day after the women had been seen distributing religious flyers around the town in Altay Prefecture two weeks before.

[In early July](#) 2014, a Xinjiang house church pastor was detained in Beijing as he got off a plane to visit local family members.

On July 3, 2014, more than 20 worshippers were detained by plainclothes officers in Urumqi during an "illegal gathering." An American music teacher, who was present, was later deported.

On July 6, 2014, six pastors and employees from a house church in Kuerle were detained and questioned for organizing a summer camp for elementary students.

Later, on July 10, police in another part of Urumqi raided a training class attended by more than 50 people at a house church. At least three church leaders were detained and given 15-days of administrative detention for being part of an "illegal gathering."

In late August 2014, local police in Urumqi raided a large gathering at a house church. Zheng Yayue, the person in charge of the church, was placed under administrative detention for five days for "engaging in religious activities at a site not designated for religious activities."
