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Assembly of Chinese Catholic representatives extolls "independence and autonomy"

59 bishops present at assembly, as well as the state administration for religious affairs director and members of the United Front. Future changes in the leadership of the Council of Bishops and the Patriotic Association. Extolling of autonomy (from the Holy See), a non-positive sign. The Global Times reiterates preconditions for dialogue. A state church. The criticism of Card. Joseph Zen and Hong Kong's Justice and Peace. One Catholic: This assembly is a slap in the face to the Vatican.

By Bernardo Cervellera

Asia News (28.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2j3AqZs> - In a stifling hotel lounge Tian Tai Beijing, the Ninth Assembly of Chinese Catholic Representatives, the sovereign body that directs bishops, priests and laity, began yesterday. According to the State Administration there are 365 delegates from 31 provinces and municipalities for Religious Affairs (SARA), although judging the hall's capacity there seem to be much less. The gathering (the "Great Ninth" as media call it) will last until December 30. Attendees include priests,

nuns, lay people, members of the Government (especially the United Front and SARA) and bishops.

At the last gathering, in December 2010, the Vatican had asked the bishops to "avoid making gestures ... that contradict communion with the Pope". This Assembly had been judged "incompatible with Catholic doctrine", as it submits the authority of the bishops to the meeting and pursues the ideal of Church independence (from the Holy See).

This time, perhaps because of rekindled hopes for dialogue between China and the Vatican, the Holy See, while reaffirming its "known" position with regard to the assembly, has not given any indication to bishops whether to participate or not. In a statement released just a few days ago, the Holy See said it reserves the right to judge the Assembly on the basis of "concrete facts" and expects "positive signals" from the government. This position which has been judged as too vague by Chinese Catholics, has given the green light to many bishops to unscrupulously take part in the meeting.

The bishops present include Msgr. Ma Yinglin of Kunming (Yunnan), president of the so-called Chinese bishops' conference (not recognized by the Holy See because it does not include underground bishops); Msgr. Fang Xingyao of Linyi (Shandong), vice-president of the Patriotic Association; Msgr. Han Yingjin of Sanyuan (Shaanxi); Msgr. Dang Mingyan Xian (Shaanxi), the newly ordained Tang Yuange of Chengdu (Sichuan); Msgr. Chen Gongao Nanchong (Sichuan); Msgr. Luo Xuegang in Yibin (Sichuan); Msgr. Zhan Silu of Mindong (Fujian); Msgr. Guo Jincai of Chengde (Hebei). Official reports claim that there are at least 59 bishops, mostly recognized by the Holy See, as well as eight illegitimate and excommunicated bishops who, according to some were supposed to have been reconciled by the end of the Jubilee, but this has not happened. The names of the absent bishops and the reason for their absence is still unknown. In 2010, many bishops who did not participate – following the recommendation of the Holy See - were forced to take part in the Assembly.

Many Catholics in China look to the meeting as a matter of course and without surprises, but they want to see how the leadership will change. At that meeting in fact the new President of the Council of Bishops will be chosen and the new president of the Patriotic Association.

Among the possible candidates for the first charge is the name of Msgr. Joseph Shen Bin, 46, bishop of Haimen (Jiangsu), or that of Msgr. John Baptist Yang Xiaoting, 52, bishop of Yulin (Shaanxi).

Among the candidates for the presidency of the Patriotic Association, is the name of Msgr. Joseph Guo Jincai, 48, the illegitimate bishop of Chengde (Hebei). The first two are both bishops recognized by the Holy See; however the latter is one of eight illegitimate bishops.

A part from this other issues on the meeting's agenda include a revision of the regulations on religious activities as well as the amendments to the statutes of the two groups (Bishops and the Patriotic Association).

Although the themes may not appear very significant, the atmosphere is highly significant: every intervention delivered yesterday exalted the "independence" of the Church (from the Holy See); Its "autonomy" (in theology, in management, in the jurisdiction), the "patriotism" of the faith ("ai guo, ai hui": first love the nation, then love the Church), the mantra repeated by Ma Yinglin, Fang Xingyao, Wang Zuoan (director of SARA), etc ...

Another item on the agenda is the assimilation of the President Xi Jinping's address to the religions in the meeting with the United Front last April. In it he asks the religions "Sinicize themselves" (moving away from the West); to "serve the reform and

development of the nation" and to support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.

In words, these sentences would seem to open up a future for religions and the Catholic Church at the service of the Chinese people; in reality it unambiguously points to a State church, controlled in all of her movements and projects.

It was precisely for this reason that Card. Joseph Zen, bishop emeritus of Hong Kong and a great champion of religious freedom, in his blog on December 24, had said that the Chinese government "wants an unconditional submission" of the Church and that the Assembly is "the most formal and explicit expression of the 'schismatic' nature of such a Church".

This position has also been reiterated by the Hong Kong Justice and Peace Commission which two days ago, December 26, demonstrated in front of China's representation in Hong Kong, denouncing that the Assembly is contrary to Catholic doctrine.

What is also of note is the change in tone in the Chinese world. In the days following the Vatican statement, the spokesman for the Foreign Ministry began to use very moderate tones regarding the Vatican and the Catholic Church without speaking of issues such as autonomy, independence, of self-appointment of bishops, relations with Taiwan. Yesterday, however, the *Global Times* newspaper (close to the Chinese Communist Party's *People's Daily*), published an editorial returning to the tones and demands of old, laying out the conditions for a constructive dialogue to arrive to diplomatic relations. These "requirements" are: "recognition of the One China" (break ties with Taiwan) and "no interference in China's internal affairs", including the appointment of bishops.

One Catholic has thus commented: "The Vatican asked for 'positive signals' and all it got was a slap in the face. The Assembly extolls the independence of the Church from the Holy See and all dialogue is back to square one".

Old guard and illegitimate bishops dominate the new Catholic Assembly

Ma Yinglin and Fang Xingyao are re-elected presidents of the Bishops Council and the Patriotic Association, respectively. The principles of independence, autonomy, self-management and sinicisation are extolled. There is no "positive signal" as hoped by the Vatican.

By: Elizabeth Li

Asia News (28.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2iBQKiU> - The new leadership of the two government-sanctioned Catholic Church organizations was elected today (Dec 28), the second day of the Ninth Assembly of Chinese Catholic Representatives held in Beijing since yesterday.

The leaders of the Patriotic Association (PA) and Bishops Council are almost the same as those "elected" from the Eighth Assembly, both of a term of 5 years.

Once again, illegitimate Bishop Ma Yinglin of Kunming has been re-elected as the president of the bishops' council. The papal-approved and Beijing-recognized Bishop Fang Xingyao of Linyi (Shandong) has been re-elected chairman of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA).

Leadership of Bishops' Council consists of the following bishops as vice presidents: Fang Xingyao of Linyi (Shandong); Shen Bin of Haimen (Jiangsu); [illegitimate] Zhan Silu of Mindong (Fujian); Fang Jianping of Tangshan (Hebei); [illegitimate] Guo Jincai (also as secretary general); Pei Junmin of Liaoning; Li Shan of Beijing; Yang Xiaoting of Yulin (Shaanxi); He Zeqing of Wanzhou, and Yang Yongqiang of Zhoucun (Shandong).

CCPA vice presidents are [illegitimate] Ma Yinglin of Kunming (Yunnan); Shen Bin of Haimen (Jiangsu); [illegitimate] Lei Shiyin of Leshan (Sichuan); Liu Yuanlong (layman, also as secretary general); [illegitimate] Huang Bingzhang of Shantou (Guangdong); Shu Nanwu (layman of Jiangxi); [illegitimate] Yue Fusheng of Harbin (Heilongjiang); Meng Qinglu of Hohhot (Inner Mongolia); Sister Wu Lin (of Wuhan) and Shi Xueqin (laywoman of Fujian).

Commenting on the Ninth Assembly, Father Joseph, in Central China, told AsiaNews that the Ninth Assembly has not seen any changes. In addition to the continuous adherence to the principles of independence, autonomy and self-administration, the Assembly also emphasized on "Sinicization" of the Catholic Church in China.

As for the newly-elected leadership of the "Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association" and the "Bishops Conference of the Catholic Church in China", it has been almost the same players. Two new faces are Bishop He Zeqing of Wanzhou and Yang Yongqiang of Zhoucun (Shandong), both have mandate of the pope and are recognized by the Chinese government.

The status of Bishop Shen Bin has obviously been elevated. He was originally vice chairman of CCPA, and now also vice president of the bishops' council

Apparently, the "positive signals" expected by the Holy See did not appear; whereas, Wang Zuo'an, director of State Administration for Religious Affairs hopes the Holy See can be "flexible and pragmatic", and that has become a response to the Vatican statement released prior to the Ninth Assembly.

A China-Vatican relations observer told AsiaNews that same personnel means leaving the matter as it is for the present.

A priest in China commented that the atmosphere of the Ninth Assembly was obviously more relaxed and the tone of Wang Zuo'an's speech was softer than before.

One observer pointed out that there is no mention or appearance of an elderly illegitimate Bishop Tu Shihua of Puqi, who resides in Beijing.

The Shepherds of Living Stone Church

By: Yaxue Cao



Pastor Su Tianfu (left) and Pastor Yang Hua

China Change (25.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2hECXsb> - On December 9, 2015, after dropping their two sons off at school, Pastor Yang Hua (仰华) and his wife Wang Hongwu (王洪雾) of the Living Stone house church (活石教会) in Guiyang, made their way to the 24th story of Guiyang International Center, which hosts the main hall of their congregation. At the same time every Wednesday, at three different church locations, Living Stone congregants hold a prayer service. A few days prior, government Neighborhood Committees and police stations dispatched personnel to go door-by-door to the homes of hundreds of Living Stone church members, warning them against attending the Wednesday service. "We'll arrest whoever goes," they were told. Needless to say, the authorities had the home addresses, workplaces, telephone numbers, and other personal information of every churchgoer. The few who were determined to attend that morning were intercepted by government agents, who deliberately collided with their car and then dragged them off to the local police station to settle the "accident."

The prayer service was set to start at 9:30 a.m., but at 9:00 well over 100 "integrated law enforcement" agents swept in. There were personnel from the Bureau of Civil Affairs and the Bureau of Religious Administration, public security bureau agents, and a squad of SWAT police in full armed regalia. They demanded that Pastor Yang open all the doors. After he refused, they called over their locksmith. When the "law enforcement personnel" attempted to enter the office and the sound control room next to it, to take the computer hard drives, Pastor Yang stood blocking the doorway. He demanded that the technical personnel present their work identification cards. When they said they didn't have any, he announced that they wouldn't be allowed in. At that point, one of the commanders of the operation yelled out "SWAT police, come over here!" A few burly members of the SWAT team ran over, lifted Yang Hua off his feet, and carried him away to a corner next to the elevator, pinning him there.

Pastor Su Tianfu (苏天富), who had just finished his errands in the morning and arrived at the church, attempted, abortively, to reason with the agents. They began confiscating the church's computers, equipment, and anything else they thought useful. They said they would provide a list of the items confiscated, but over a year later no such list has been forthcoming. They also confiscated the cellphones of Yang Hua, Hongwu, Pastor Su, and a number of couples who arrived for the service, deleting all photographs on them.

When the raid was over they posted two notices sealing the church doors, one saying that the church was an illegal civil organization, the other that it had set up a center of religious activity without authorization. Yang Hua and Hongwu were taken to the police station. Living Stone's two branch locations were dealt with in a similar manner.

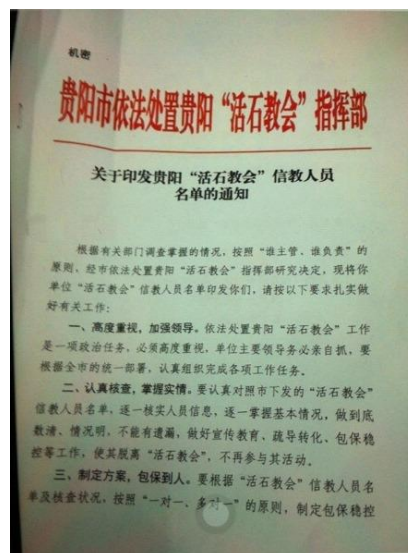
On December 14 Pastor Su was taken into custody at his home by police. Two days later when he was released, they warned him that he would be charged with "divulging state secrets" later. A year on, he is still technically "on bail pending further trial," which means that his freedom of movement is restricted.

A few days after Yang Hua was arrested the authorities raided his home and took away his computer and everything else that they thought would be useful for their investigation.

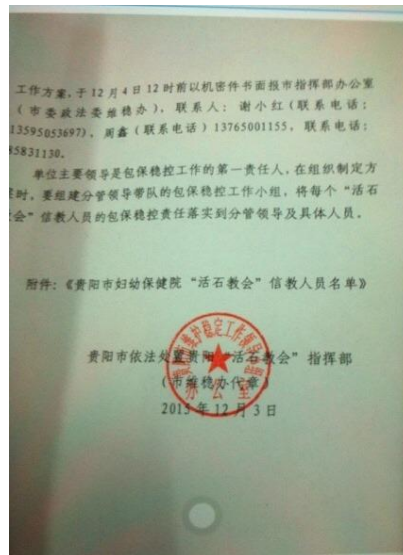
On December 26, 2016, Yang Hua will be on trial for “deliberately divulging state secrets” (故意泄露国家机密罪). The Chinese government seems to deliberately time cases of political persecution around the Thanksgiving and Christmas vacations, as a means of avoiding international attention.

The “state secrets” in question is a document issued by an *ad hoc* office set up to eliminate the Living Stone Church, which goes by the title of the “Guiyang Municipal Command Center for Legally Dealing With the Living Stone Church” (贵阳市依法处置贵阳活石教会指挥部). Dated December 3, 2015, the document bore the official seal of the Office of the Guiyang Municipal Stability Maintenance Work Leading Small Group (贵阳市维护稳定工作领导小组办公室). It said that “Dealing with the Living Stone church according to the law is a political task that must be given a high level of priority. Leaders of work units must be personally on task, fall in line with the entire city’s overall deployments, and earnestly mobilize to complete all the work.” Attached to it was a list of names of every Living Stone member, which was forwarded to each of their workplaces, demanding that those employees be investigated and placed under “stability control” (稳控).

The letter came to the attention of a young woman named Wang Yao (王瑶), who worked in the office of the Party Committee of the Maternal and Child Healthcare Hospital of Guiyang City. She knew a friend, Yu Lei (余雷), who attended Living Stone bible study sessions. So she gave Yu photographs of the document. Now, Wang and Yu have been tried for “illegally acquiring state secrets” (非法获取国家机密罪) and “illegally disseminating state secrets” (非法传播国家机密) respectively. Their judgements have not yet been handed down.



The “secret” document issued by the “guiyang municipal command center for legally dealing with the living stone church”, page 1.



Page 2 of the "secret" document.

Two Young Preachers from Poverty

The two descriptions I kept hearing about the two pastors of the Living Stone church were, firstly, that they were from the poorest parts of Guizhou (Guizhou itself is one of the poorest provinces in China), and secondly that they were both very young. Pastor Su Tianfu was born in 1975, while Pastor Yang Hua was born in 1976; they come from the neighbouring counties of Qianxi (黔西) and Nayong (纳雍) respectively.

Zhang Tan (张坦), a member of the Living Stone church and an independent scholar of Christianity in China, explained that Guizhou was one of the 12 centers of missionary activity established by the China Inland Mission, the protestant organization founded by 19th century English missionary Hudson Taylor (戴德生). Yang Hua and Su Tianfu grew up in an area in which the China Inland Mission had once preached the Gospel, until early 1950s when missionaries were expelled by the Communist Party. Most Christians at that point were forcibly integrated into the Party-controlled "Three-Self" church movement. After the Cultural Revolution, Zhang Tan says, Christians in Guizhou began to embrace their faith ardently. In the poverty-stricken far-off reaches of mountainous Guizhou, he added, neither the Three-Self church nor house churches had much purchase.

Yang Hua was born Li Guozhi (李国志), the fourth sibling in a third-generation Christian family. When he was young, though, he not only refused to believe, but found the idea embarrassing. His father was an elder in a house church. He spent most of his time dealing with church affairs and relatively less on looking after his family. He also struck his kids at the slightest provocation. Nevertheless, after suffering a sudden accident in the family, and personally experiencing the transformative effect of prayer, Yang Hua became a Christian.

At around that time there were Christian workers offering in his hometown Bible study sessions, which he joined. Before long he felt the desire to spread the Gospel himself. At age 13 in 1989 (he probably had little idea what was taking place in Beijing that year), he cut short his studies and became a roaming preacher. First he followed a group in his hometown, then went onto Yunnan, Guangxi, Henan, Zhejiang, and other provinces to preach. Christians in Zhejiang wanted him to put down roots there, but he felt the urge to return to Guizhou.

In 1997 Yang Hua, then 21, moved from Zhejiang back to Guiyang.

Su Tianfu grew up in abject poverty. In 2011, in an interview with the Christian author Yu Jie (余杰), he mentioned that the only clothes he wore when growing up were hand-me-downs from relatives. In winter, he said, there was often hardly any food at home, so he only ate once a day. His father was a drunk who beat him. When he was unable to pay the miscellaneous expenses for junior high school, one of the teachers pitied him and only made him pay half up front. The rest he earned over summer, collecting trash, hauling sandbags at a construction site, and laboring as a road builder. When he finished middle-school he applied for junior teachers' college (师专) because it was free. In his own words, he was a cynical and hopeless youth who was convinced that life had no meaning.

But he began to join a Bible study class at the teachers' college. There was no pastor and no preacher; sometimes a fine arts teacher at the school, who was a Christian, would lead them in Bible study, or play hymns on tape that everyone would sing to. "Though I didn't understand a great deal about the truth of it, I participated in the meetings regularly, and I felt in my soul a great sense of contentment," Su said. "I felt joy."

On Christmas 1993 Su Tianfu was baptized as a Christian — the first in his family. In 1997 at the age of 22 he quit his job teaching elementary school and went to Guiyang.

1997-2000: Each Their Own Ministry

The two young men first met while serving the "Dandelion" Christian Fellowship at Guizhou University of Technology. It was established in 1980 by two foreign missionaries who were teaching there.

In June of 1997, Su Tianfu went to Guangzhou to be further trained in pastoral care. In Guangdong he began to regularly participate in church meetings led by the renowned pastor Lin Xiangao (林献羔) of the Damazhan house church. He studied Cantonese and traveled with other disciples to found churches and spread the Gospel around Guangdong. In 2000 he married Ouyang Manping (欧阳满平), a young lady he'd gotten to know in their Bible training classes.

Back in Guiyang, Yang Hua joined a house church group of a few dozen members. It was there that he got to know Wang Hongwu, at the time a nurse at the charity clinic run by the church. When he revealed that he took an interest in her, however, he was curtly rebuffed. As Hongwu put it: "He didn't fit my criteria. All the things a girl wanted, he didn't have: a diploma, money, good looks — he didn't measure up in any area."

Yang Hua was deeply hurt, and for a while fell into terrible health. He had nosebleeds and high fever, and came to the clinic for treatment. This went on for a while until he decided he had to pull himself out of it. At a workers' meeting one day, Yang Hua told a Ms. Li that "Next week I'm going out to the Yachi River" (鸭池河). He'd been planning and hoping to establish a church there for a long time, but had put it off because of the emotional turmoil of being rejected. Hongwu overheard the conversation. "My heart thumped," she said. "It was like a shut door being suddenly flung open."

Yachi River at the time was the headquarters to the Ninth Engineering Bureau of the Sinohydro (中国水利水电第九工程局有限公司), inhabited by thousands of construction workers and their families. Over the next two years, Yang Hua went door to door spreading the Gospel. There had been only one or two believers when he started, and number quickly mushroomed to over a hundred over the next two years. In 2000 he went back to Guiyang, and in 2001 he and Hongwu married.

Preaching and Training in Guizhou from 2000 to 2008

"Even though I'd lived in Guangzhou for quite a few years, had learnt Cantonese, and was gradually getting used to life there, there was always a voice in my heart telling me: 'You have to return to your home province and begin a new phase of your Ministry.' Though Guizhou was poor and behind-the-times, it was a much bigger canvas," Su Tianfu said.

On the day that Su and his wife arrived in Guiyang, Yang Hua and another friend met them at the train station. Their journey together had begun.

In his interview with Yu Jie, Pastor Su explained what happened over those years. First, the two young men each led their own small-scale house church assemblies. They also returned to serve a mission in their hometowns in the Bijie (毕节) and Liupanshui (六盘水) prefectures, southwest Guizhou, populated by the Miao and Yi ethnic groups. As a way of alleviating the reliance on preachers coming out to the countryside, from 2003 to 2008 they held training sessions in Guiyang every year for ethnic Christian workers, and each session lasted three months, training 20 students each time.

Beginning in 2003 they arranged for Christian workers to travel around Guizhou, focusing on regions without churches, to conduct short- and long-term missionary work. They've relied on the donations of congregants for their livelihoods, though their wives have also worked to help support the family.

Their activities have always been a matter of close attention for the authorities. In 2003 they got a tip off that the secret police were investigating them, and were likely going to make arrests. They prepared travel bags and were ready to flee at short notice, but in the end they didn't flee. In the years followed, similar threats stalked them, until police interrogations and menace became a part of life.

A City on the Hill

By 2008 Yang Hua and Su Tianfu were being harassed and attacked wherever they went in Guizhou. They were increasingly running short of resources, until they were unable to pay the rent on their training venue.

It bothered them that the house churches they led in Guiyang had been underground. "Even though it was just a small meeting of a dozen or so people, we had to act like the underground [revolutionary-era] Communist Party you see on television dramas — using codewords, acting secretively as though we were doing something terrible," Su said.

But at that point, as Su judged it in the 2011 interview, Guiyang had only one Three-Self church for a population of five or six million, plus a seminary and another small church on the outskirts of town. "On the one hand, a lot of people had never ever heard the Gospel, but on the other, the existing Christians had nowhere to meet."

Through prayer and careful consideration together, their small church groups started to think clearly on what they wanted to achieve: they wanted their fellowship to grow and thrive in the open, and they wanted to make an impact on the city of Guiyang.

"Given that Christians are the light of the world, the church is the city on the hill. So it can't be hidden. It's got to be public," Su Tianfu said.

The new church they opened would be the "Living Stone" church, a name that Yang Hua picked. It was drawn from Peter 2:4-5: "To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ."

After spring in 2008 they began drawing up plans to rent an office space for worship. In Easter they held a dedication ceremony for a new church with about 50 members. Apart from regular services, the church held Christmas celebrations, hosted weddings, and organized excursions, all of which attracted more members.

Beginning in 2009 the Living Stone church each year baptized between a few dozen and over 100 new believers. Their Christmas celebrations attracted over 1,000, either participants or onlookers. The government was apprised of every large-scale activity in advance. When the authorities tried to interfere, the churchmen, often led by Pastor Yang Hua, argued their case strongly and never gave ground. In 2011, in a river on the southern outskirts of Guiyang, they held a baptism ceremony for 120 new Christians. With friends and family included there were probably between 300 to 400 people there. The government then mobilized at least twice as many security personnel to watch them.

As part of the church's pastoral program with congregants, they encouraged all believers to also participate in small-scale house church meetings. Last year when the church was formally banned by the Guiyang authorities, there were over 20 of these small house church congregations, each with between one and a few dozen members. The effect of the small groups was to give believers a sense of family, return, and belonging, where spreading the Gospel, caring for one another, and caring for society became part of their way of life.

Most of the congregants were between 20 and 40, from all walks of life: businessmen, teachers, doctors, professionals, public servants, homemakers, students, and more.

For years they facilitated adoption of abandoned infants, fostered children with developmental disabilities, taught survival skills to children in orphanages, and performed other welfare services — all of which they were praised for in the local press. Separately, a number of church members founded or participated in charitable social programs of their own, helping disabled people, orphans, the elderly, and others. The church became an interconnecting structure, linking the community with the wider society.

Church management was handled by a 12-member board of directors elected by the congregation, which held meetings to discuss and make decisions on church affairs both large and small. When there were items of serious disagreement, they put the matter aside rather than have the majority overrule a minority. The goal was to eventually reach a consensus.

As the number of congregants continued to grow, the church bought three residential units on the 24th floor of the Guiyang International Center with a total 600 square meters. After they bought the units, the church began coming under more intense pressure from the authorities. Before they began using them, the government posted notices inside and outside the building stating that the newly established church was "an unapproved non-religious site established without permission," and that pastors Su Tianfu and Yang Hua were unapproved, unregistered ministers.

On November 8, 2015, Living Stone congregants, under the menacing gaze of hundreds of riot police, SWAT police, regular police, and officials from a multitude of government agencies, held a ceremony dedicating their new church. When government agents later attempted to force them to join the regime-controlled "Three-Self" church movement, they were firmly rejected. The result was a campaign of harassment, threats, and efforts at blocking believers from attending.

Defending the Rights of Small Churches

Pastor Yang Hua and Pastor Su divided their duties roughly in half: Su handled internal affairs, and Yang took care of liaison and external activities. As one congregant told me in an interview: "We've been helping small rural churches around Guizhou for years. When these churches are raided and broken up and their members arrested, no one else

even knows." The small churches seek out Yang Hua, who finds lawyers to defend them. Quite a few cases have been defended successfully.

Hongwu, Pastor Yang's wife, said that on every occasion that brothers and sisters of the faith have been attacked by the government, Yang Hua stands up for them.

In May 2014 the authorities made a series of arrests of churchgoers in Liupanshui (六盘水), at a church that had grown rapidly and had held regular services for over 20 years. Now it was called an "evil religion" and its members detained. Yang Hua engaged lawyers in Beijing and Shanghai who traveled with him to Liupanshui, where they were followed by government vehicles. Chen Jiangang (陈建刚), one of the lawyers, described the torture that believers were subject to while in custody: they were beaten hard with long wooden staffs, forced to stand for prolonged periods, starved, deprived of sleep, and had lit cigarettes stuffed into their mouths.

In 2015 there was a similar incident in Dagan, Qianxi county (黔西大关), where a number of locals, who had returned from years in Hangzhou as migrant workers, were arrested after setting up a thriving church. Yang Hua and two lawyers from out of town arrived to help. They were followed by government-hired thugs everywhere they went. The men rammed their vehicle into Yang Hua's, and pulled out long machetes threatening to hack him and the lawyers to death.

More than one person has described Yang Hua as diminutive in size and "frail" in appearance: he's just under 1.6m (5'3"), is somewhat hunched due to back inflammation (ankylosing spondylitis) and often in pain. But when the rubber hits the road and fellow Christians are being assailed and threatened, he's on the front lines defending their rights, not in the least afraid. He carries of aura of invincibility. "Pastor Yang Hua's courage and sense of responsibility is extraordinary," a church member who was on some of these trips with Yang Hua told me.

Zhang Tan once wrote an article about how Yang Hua dealt with a traffic case. "No matter the size of the case, Yang Hua fights it from the lowest level court to the highest. Even if he's losing every step of the way, he doesn't give up." The process, Zhang told me, has revealed the savagery of the government power, but it's also shown Yang Hua's tenacity.

In today's China, this sort of resistance doesn't have much practical value. In the Dagan case, the five churchmen arrested were all imprisoned on China's "evil religion" laws, and the Living Stone church has now also been crushed. Indeed, some church members complained that the fate of Living Stone was precisely because Pastor Yang Hua got involved in too many affairs of other churches.

As far as the Chinese Communist Party is concerned, Christianity and its dissemination is in and of itself a question of ideological competition. For decades the Party has used the "Three-Self" church system to integrate and assimilate Christianity under the banner of "patriotism," exerting strict doctrinal and administrative control over these "competing" faiths. The escalated repression in Zhejiang, Henan and other provinces over the last three years are another example of the Party and Xi Jinping's determination to dig out this supposed threat by the root. The shutdown of the Living Stone church and the arrest of Pastor Yang Hua is simply one development in the overall political schema in China. It has little to do with the "leak" of a ridiculous government document.

Zhang said that Christianity in China has reached a point in time, and that Guiyang's Living Stone church is a perfect product of this point in time.

The Judgment of the Party vs. the Judgement of God

Since his detention, Pastor Yang Hua's wife and children have been prevented from seeing him because his case "involves state secrets." The two lawyers she engaged met Yang Hua for the first time in March and again in May. Yang Hua revealed how his interrogators used torture to try to extract a confession. They fixed him to an iron chair,

stomped his feet with their shoes, and threatened his life and that of his wife and children. They also told him: "We know we can't change your faith, but we control everything. If we want, we can paint you as a greedy pastor and destroy your reputation."

The lawyers said that despite the threats, Pastor Yang Hua didn't give in. Nor did the church's accountant, Zhang Xiuhong (张秀红), who was detained in July 2015 — she is still being held, though according to Chinese criminal procedure should have long ago either been tried or released.

In September, lawyers reported that Yang Hua was suffering from liver pain, and had scabies all over his body.

The authorities claim that the case has nothing to do with religion. But they've denied Yang Hua, and the three other detainees, the right to read the Bible while in custody. For months Yang Hua's wife hand-copied Bible passages and mailed them to him, but in October that final connection too was severed too.

For the pending trial, police warned lawyers not to plead not-guilty (indeed, the judicial system in China is government-directed theater, and everyone is expected to follow the script). But in their Legal Opinion submitted to the court in November, the two lawyers questioned the legality and authority of the *ad hoc* agency set up to suppress the church, the "Guiyang Municipal Command Center for Legally Dealing With the Living Stone Church." They also questioned the validity of the regulation cited by the prosecution: "Regulations on State Secrets, Their Classification, and Scope in Religious Work." It's a document whose existence has never been announced to the public, and whose issuer, legal remit, and period of effect remain unknown. Yet it forms the basis of the charges against Pastor Yang Hua.

Hongwu said that though she has received no announcement of the trial, the only reason she won't be there is if she's put under house arrest. Pastor Su, according to a source, has been taken out of Guiyang on an involuntary trip.

As for the fate of the Living Stone church and the trial of Pastor Yang, Zhang Tan shared his thoughts: China's "governing the country according to the law" (依法治国) is about using harsh legal instruments to control the people, in the model of the Qin Dynasty. It's about maintaining and exercising the power of rulers, and has nothing to do with protecting the rights of the people. This, he said, is really the "Chinese characteristics." "Secrets" are everywhere in today's China, he said. "For example, they want to demolish my home, so they have a 'secret' document for demolishing my home. If I get ahold of this document, it is me who violated the law, not they, who want to destroy my property. Only a dictatorship has secrets everywhere, and it's only under a dictatorship that one finds such absurdities at every turn."

Zhang Tan argues that throughout Chinese history, there have been benevolent governments and ruthless governments. But take any issue and compare today's communist rule with that of the Qin or Ming — widely seen as the harshest and most abusive dynasties — and the regime of today is worse. "The Chinese nation," he said, "has come to an end."

A sense of peace fills the letters Pastor Yang Hua has sent to his wife and children from his cell. He told Hongwu that his conditions have improved, and that he had no more need of money or other supplies. His imprisonment, he wrote, is a sabbatical that Jesus granted him after 23 years of toil. He said he'll enjoy it, "like a child who's had his full of milk, sleeping in his mother's arms."

China cracks down on Christmas celebrations, bans Protestant services



Zhang Mingxuan, president of the Chinese House Church Alliance, in undated photo.

Radio Free Asia (23.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2iDxmW1> - China's atheist ruling Communist Party remains uneasy about the public celebration of Christmas, placing restrictions on events to mark the festival, which is seen by the powers that be as a dangerous foreign import, Christians told RFA in recent interviews.

In the eastern province of Zhejiang, which has a large Protestant population, a hotel was forced to cancel two Christmas services planned by local churches on its premises after it received a warning from the government.

A Protestant "house church" had reserved the conference hall at the Chaowang Hotel in Zhejiang's provincial capital, Hangzhou, staff and religious rights activists said.

"We can't host these sorts of activities, because now there are very tight restrictions in place," an employee who answered the phone at the Chaowang Hotel told RFA.

"We are unable to host such meetings for the time being, and any that have been previously booked will have to be canceled," the employee said. "We're not doing them any more, because anything religious is too sensitive."

According to the U.S.-based Christian rights group ChinaAid, the hotel had been directly ordered by local officials not to host any religious activities, in spite of the fact that the same church had used the venue for Christmas services in previous years.

The move to stop the house church from meeting follows a prolonged cross demolition program in the past year or so by authorities in Zhejiang province.

Authorities in Zhejiang have recently moved to prevent unofficial "house churches" from meeting, and have also banned all forms of religious activity in hospitals, in an ongoing crackdown targeting the region's burgeoning Protestant Christian community.

'Hostile Western forces'

The demolition of "illegal" Christian crosses from the roofs of churches came amid growing resistance from local believers, but was billed as a civic pride and building safety campaign in official media.

Zhejiang has been lauded by the party's ideological arm, the United Front Work Department, for "tackling ... the difficult-to-tackle problems, grasping norms, strong management and promoting harmony and stability," according to a report on the official website of the State Administration for Religious Affairs.

Meanwhile, the authorities view many forms of religion as dangerous foreign imports, with Zhejiang officials warning last year against the "infiltration of Western hostile forces" in the form of religion.

Zhang Mingxuan, president of the Chinese House Church Alliance, said the government takes similar actions to clamp down on Christian worship annually around Christmas.

"They have been holding their services in this hotel for more than a decade, because the government doesn't allow religious gatherings in public places," Zhang said.

"They use public safety and national security as an excuse for the ban, but they're not talking about the safety and security of the general public; they mean the safety and security of their regime, of the Communist Party," he said.

Beijing-based Protestant pastor Xu Yonghai, who heads the Beijing Sheng'ai Protestant Family Church Fellowship, said a nationwide crackdown on unofficial Christian worship has brought more Protestant believers under the watchful gaze of the state in recent years.

"At the beginning of the 1990s, the house churches would take out a lease on their place of worship, or hire out various venues for their Christmas celebrations," Xu said.

"Back then, it was all done on the quiet, and the police would order the venue not to host the event if they found out about it," he said.

"Nowadays, there's less overall interference from the police, but this sort of thing still happens; it has happened to us, too," he said.

'New wave of 'heavy pressure'

ChinaAid quoted a Zhejiang-based Christian surnamed Hu as saying that the cross-demolition program in the province had heralded a new wave of "heavy pressure" from the government, however.

A member of another Hangzhou-based house church, Chongyitang, said they hoped their Christmas plans would still go ahead, however.

"We have services every year on Dec. 21, 23, 24 and 25," she said. "We preach the gospel, it's church, not just a meeting."

"We are evangelists, so we are open to new members."

Meanwhile, police in the central province of Henan have broadcast a message on the smartphone chat app WeChat calling on all colleges and universities in Shangqiu city to crack down on any form of Christmas activities, ChinaAid said.

"This highlights the ignorant and obstinate attitude of the authorities towards Christianity and universal civilization," the group said.

"Our organization strongly condemns the Chinese government's violation of freedom of religious belief," it said.

Reported by Lau Siu-fung for RFA's Cantonese Service, and by He Ping for the Mandarin Service. Translated and written in English by Luisetta Mudie.

EP resolution on the demolition of the Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist Academy

European Parliament condemns the demolition of the Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist Academy and the imprisonment of scholar Ilham Tohti by Chinese authorities

EP (15.12.2016) - The Chinese authorities should suspend the demolition of Larung Gar, stop the eviction of its residents and respect the freedom of expression, culture and religious belief of Tibetans, say MEPs. The demolition of monastic homes began on 20 July 2016 and it is estimated that as many as 1,000 monks and nuns have been evicted so far, with at least three nuns having committing suicide in protest.

Parliament draws attention to the "increasingly repressive regime" faced by minorities, in particular Tibetans and Uighurs, and is deeply concerned by the deterioration of the human rights situation in Tibet. MEPs call upon the Chinese government to resume constructive talks with Tibetan representatives, which were ended by China in 2010, in order to come to a peaceful solution.

Further, MEPs call for the immediate and unconditional release of Ilham Tohti, an economics scholar convicted of alleged separatism-related offences, and one of the four 2016 Sakharov prize nominees. They strongly condemn his life sentence, which was

handed down without respect to due process of law, and further urge the Chinese authorities to allow him monthly visits from family members and to restore his teaching permit.

Full text of the resolution is available at <http://bit.ly/2hToYyx>

The Parliament

- 1. Urges the Chinese authorities to stop the demolition of Larung Gar and the eviction of its residents, and in this way to respect the freedom of religion in accordance with its international commitments in the field of human rights;*
- 2. Calls on the Chinese authorities to initiate a dialogue and to engage constructively on developments in Larung Gar with the local community and its religious leaders, and to address concerns regarding overcrowded religious institutes by allowing Tibetans to establish more institutes and build more facilities; calls for adequate compensation and the re-housing of Tibetans who have been evicted during the demolitions in Larung Gar at the place of their choice to continue their religious activities;*
- 3. Deplores the sentencing of ten Tibetans by the Intermediate People's Court in Barkham to different terms ranging from 5 to 14 years in prison for taking part in an 80th birthday celebration of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Ngaba County;*
- 4. Is deeply concerned by the deterioration of the human rights situation in Tibet which has led to an increase in the number of self-immolation cases; criticises the increase in military displays on the Tibetan plateau that will only lead to escalating tension in the region; condemns the increase in the use of surveillance systems in Tibetan private households;*
- 5. Is worried about the increasingly repressive regime faced by different minorities, in particular Tibetans and Uighurs, as additional constraints are put on the constitutional guarantees of their right to freedom of cultural expression and religious belief, and to the freedom of speech and expression, peaceful assembly and association, calling into question China's stated commitment to the rule of law and respect for international obligations; demands that the authorities respect these fundamental freedoms;*
- 6. Is worried about the adoption of the package of security laws and its impact on minorities in China, particularly the law on counter-terrorism that could lead to the penalisation of peaceful expression of Tibetan culture and religion and the law on the management of international NGOs which will come into effect on 1 January 2017 and will place human rights groups under the strict control of the government, as this constitutes a strictly topdown approach instead of encouraging partnership between local and central government and civil society;*
- 7. Urges the Chinese Government to amend the provisions in the security law package that narrow the space for civil society organisations and tighten government control over religious practices; calls on the Chinese Government to provide and guarantee a fair and safe environment for all NGOs and human rights defenders to operate freely in the country, which could greatly complement the state delivery of social services with a bottom-up approach and contribute to the advancement of social and economic, political and civil rights;*
- 8. Calls on the Chinese Government to resume the dialogue with Tibetan representatives, which was ended by China in 2010, in order to find an inclusive political solution to the crisis in Tibet; calls for respect for the freedoms of expression, association and religion of the Tibetan people as enshrined in the Constitution; believes that respect for minority*

rights is a key element of democracy and the rule of law that is indispensable for political stability;

9. Strongly condemns the imprisonment of Ilham Tohti who is serving a life sentence on alleged charges of separatism; deplores the fact that the due process of law was not respected and that he did not benefit from the right to a proper defence; urges the Chinese authorities to respect the norm of granting one visit per month for family members;

10. Calls for the immediate and unconditional release of Ilham Tohti and of his supporters detained in relation to his case; further calls for Ilham Tohti's teaching permit to be restored and for his free movement to be guaranteed within and outside China;

11. Recalls the importance of the EU raising the issue of human rights violations in China, in particular the case of minorities in Tibet and Xinjiang, at every political and human rights dialogue with the Chinese authorities, in line with the EU's commitment to project a strong, clear and unified voice in its approach to the country, including the yearly Human Rights Dialogues; further points out that, as part of its ongoing reform process and increasing global engagement, China has opted into the international human rights framework by signing up to a wide range of international human rights treaties, and therefore calls for dialogue to be pursued with China to live up to these commitments;

12. Deplores the fact that the 35th round of the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue will probably not take place before the end of 2016, as agreed; urges the Chinese Government to agree to a high-level dialogue in the first weeks of 2017;

13. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the Council, the Commission, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, and the Government and the Parliament of the Peoples' Republic of China.

List of Tibetan Buddhists sentenced to 5-14 prison terms for taking part in an 80th birthday celebration of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Ngaba County

HRWF (19.12.2016) - On 6 December 2016, the Barkham County People's Intermediate Court sentenced around ten Tibetans including monks to varying prison terms in Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefectures.

1. "**Drukda**, 50, has been sentenced to 14 years and his whereabouts still unknown since his arrest from the monastery in November last year. According to sources, he was arrested for organizing a celebration of the exile leader His Holiness the Dalai Lama's 80th Birthday," said Kanyag. He also stated that the monk from Ngaba was also a former political prisoner earlier imprisoned in 2008 for over a year.

2. **Lobsang Khedup**, 44, has been arrested for his involvement in setting up a prayer ceremony on His Holiness on his 80th Birthday. "He was also a former political prisoner have served a three year sentence in 2011. During his time, he was subjected to extreme torture and upon his release he was in poor condition. His family had to incur a lot to nurse him back to health," said Lobsang Yeshe, another monk of Kirti Monastery based here.

3. **Lobsang Gephel** (29) has been sentenced to twelve years and his whereabouts also remain unknown. He had been arrested in 2011 and released in 2013.

4. **Lodro** (41) has been sentenced to nine years and his whereabouts remain unknown. He had been arrested in 2011 and released in 2013.

5. **Bonko Kyi** (41) a Tibetan woman, arrested in November last year has been sentenced to seven years in prison for her involvement in arranging the grand 80th birthday celebration of the Dalai Lama. She was arrested in 2011 and 2012 and was imprisoned for few months before her family managed to get her released. Since then she has been under surveillance.

6. **Akyakya** (35) who was earlier arrested in 2011 for links to a self-immolation has been sentenced to five years.

7. **Tsultrim** has been sentenced to six years.

8. **Tarey** has been sentenced to eight years.

9. **Tsendra** has been sentenced to eight years.

10. **Tsultrim** has received six years' imprisonment.

For further information, please contact Ms Zsuzsa-Anna Ferenczy. Email: zsuzsaanna.ferenczy@europarl.europa.eu

An open letter to Pope Francis on China

By Benedict Rogers

Huffpost Politics (07.11.2016) - <http://huff.to/2fFI7TI> -

Dear Holy Father,

Like every true Catholic in the world, I love you and respect your authority as the Successor of St Peter.

Like a great many people in the world, well beyond the Catholic Church, I recognise the beautiful message you, as Pope Francis, bring to the world.

And as a new Catholic who came into the Church little over ten days after your election to the papacy, my Catholic faith is inspired and intertwined with your pontificate.

I became a Catholic on Palm Sunday, 2013, received into the Church by Burma's first-ever Cardinal Charles Maung Bo. Although I am British, I became a Catholic in an Asian country emerging from dictatorship, inspired by a Church that has endured decades of persecution. I have also lived in China and Hong Kong, and have come to know and love Cardinal Joseph Zen, whose story is told, along with my other heroes, in my book From Burma to Rome, which I had the privilege of presenting to you when we met in August.

For all these reasons - because I love you, Holy Father, because I love the Church, because I love the people of China and Asia, because I love Cardinal Zen, and most of all because I love God and our Lord Jesus Christ - I humbly appeal to you to reconsider your proposed agreement with the Communist regime in China: before it is too late.

Over the past three years, the human rights situation in China has deteriorated dramatically. Hundreds of human rights lawyers, many of them Christians, have been detained, simply for defending freedom of religion and freedom of conscience cases. Thousands of Christian crosses have been destroyed. Many Christian clergy, Catholic and Protestant, remain in jail or harassed. Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims and Falun Gong practitioners continue to be persecuted. Allegations of forced organ harvesting - targeting prisoners of conscience - persist. Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Liu Xiaobo remains in jail. Hong Kong's freedoms are now in at tatters.

Earlier this year, the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission in the United Kingdom published an in-depth report, *The Darkest Moment: The Crackdown on Human Rights in China 2013-2016*. It was launched by the former Governor of Hong Kong Lord Patten, himself a Catholic, in June, and includes testimonies from Hong Kong democrats Martin Lee and Anson Chan, both Catholics.

Holy Father, you will be well aware of the arguments made by Cardinal Zen, which I need not repeat. I simply say that at this time, human rights are deteriorating drastically in China and I don't believe it is the time to compromise. At a time when religious freedom overall in China is being further restricted, when other religions are being severely persecuted, when organs may be being harvested, when lawyers are being harassed, when freedom of expression is being denied, now is not the time to seek a special arrangement for the Catholic Church. Now is not the time to kowtow.

Furthermore, while I am a very new Catholic, and so I write with all appropriate humility, two of the things that attracted me into the Church are the Church's commitment to justice and human rights, as set out in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, and the Apostolic Succession. That means the Church must take a stand against Xi Jinping's brutality as it did against Caesar's, Stalin's and Hitler's. And it means that it cannot settle for anything less than complete Papal authority over episcopal and priestly appointments in China. I don't know what deal might be about to be agreed, but I find it hard to imagine Beijing agreeing to this. If it does, then I welcome it. But if not, I urge you to reject the deal. How can bishops appointed by a communist, corrupt, cruel and brutal regime be acceptable to the Church founded by Jesus Christ?

Instead of compromise with Beijing, I urge you - Holy Father - to follow in the footsteps of the Apostles, and lead a revolution for peaceful change in China.

With humble, sincere prayers from a relatively new Catholic,

Benedict Rogers

Catholics remain split as China, Vatican reportedly finalize landmark agreement

The ongoing negotiations between China and the Vatican, if successful, will be a historic milestone in the relationship between the two parties and bring about mutual benefits. But concerns have also arise as to how many concessions each party will have to make, and what meaning they will have for Chinese Catholics.

By Zhang Yu

Global Times (25.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2fAiaEH> - As recent reports show that negotiations between China and the Vatican on diplomatic and religious relations are entering their final stage, experts and Catholic leaders are now pondering the significance of these talks for both the Catholic world and for China.

But obstacles to a full Roman Catholic presence in China remain significant, and experts and clergymen believe that even if an agreement is made, it will only be the first step in a long path toward China and the Holy See finding a mutually satisfactory situation.

Mutual benefits

"I learned indeed that there may soon be an agreement between China and the Vatican," Father Jeroom Heyndrickx, a Belgian priest who is close to the church in China and Rome, said in an e-mail response to the Global Times.

The main issue of any deal will be an agreement on how bishops in China will be appointed, according to Father Heyndrickx. "We expect and hope that this agreement will honor the Church tradition that the pope appoints the bishops and also respects the principle of the gospel 'give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar,' meaning that the government of China will have an important say in the final decisions," the missionary said.

Currently, the Catholic Church in China is divided into two communities. The State-sanctioned Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), which leads the open church of around 5.5 million members, appoints its own bishops without the approval of the pope, only the government. The "underground" community, which some experts think has more members than the CCPA, swears allegiance solely to the pope but is considered illegal by the Chinese government.

Of the roughly 110 bishops in China, most have been sanctioned by both the Chinese government and the Vatican. But there are eight bishops who don't have papal approval, and another 30 bishops who are part of the underground church and have received papal, but not government support.

"We believe that the agreement will imply that some (or all) of these 'illegal' bishops will become legal and be given a fitting appointment. Perhaps also some other (newly appointed) bishops will be ordained soon with the agreement of both sides," Father Heyndrickx said.

According to exclusive sources interviewed by Reuters, the Vatican has already reached a decision to recognize at least four Chinese bishops who were appointed by Beijing without the consent of the pope and so are currently considered illegitimate by the Holy See. This has not been officially confirmed by either the Vatican or the Chinese government.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said last Friday in a regular press conference that "the channel for contact and dialogue between the two sides is open and effective," but did not disclose further details.

Both sides have shown earnest efforts in reaching a real deal, the most recent case being the pope openly meeting with Suzhou Bishop Xu Honggen who visited the Vatican this month with a mainland pilgrimage group.

The agreement, if made, will be the biggest breakthrough in the relationship between China and the Vatican for more than 60 years. For China, it's important because it "could help Chinese ease some difficult ties in the world, because of the Vatican's role in the world, heading the largest unitary religion on Earth," according to Francesco Sisci, a senior researcher at the Center of European Studies at the Renmin University of China and a Vatican affairs expert.

"It would also help the Vatican to fulfill its mission - help peace in the world and freedom of faith," Sisci said.

Radical ordinations

Although an agreement seems to be imminent, experts say forces trying to sabotage the agreement have been so strong that nothing can be considered certain until the deal is signed. "The deal is very technical, full of traps and there are many people, on all sides, directly or indirectly involved, who wish for the deal to fail or better even create an explosion ... Both sides have to deal with many forces inside China or inside the Catholic world, who oppose for various reasons this agreement," Sisci said.

In the Catholic world, vocal critics of the talks include retired Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kun, who believes that the Vatican is ignoring the underground church in the negotiations in order to appease the Chinese government, and fears the agreement will actually end up costing the Catholic Church its religious freedom. "On the day that an agreement is signed with China there will be peace and joy, but do not expect me to participate in the celebrations of the beginning of this new Church," he wrote in an article earlier this year, which was published on asianews.it, a Catholic news website.

At the end of the day, the significance of the agreement for the underground church will depend on what kind of deal is reached, according to Yang Fenggang, director of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University in Indiana.

"If the Vatican side is perceived to have made too many concessions and compromises, a large proportion of underground Catholics may refuse to accept or comply with the deal. Thus the underground church problem may not go away any time soon," he said.

"However, if the compromises are perceived by underground Catholics as reasonable, it may help to bring all underground Catholics into the open, although it may take some time to heal and restore the relations between some underground and aboveground Catholic bishops and priests." Yang said.

And even if the agreement is made, it will only be the first agreement on a long path to the diplomatic relations between the two sides, and many thorny questions will remain to be resolved through future talks, according to Agostino Giovagnoli, a professor of contemporary history at the Catholic University of Milan who closely follows the Vatican's relationship with China.

Persistent problem

In the mainland, some hardliners from the underground church are resisting the negotiations using more radical approaches that defy not only the Communist Party's rules for religion, but also the Pope. At least two priests have been ordained with neither papal or government recognition, ucanews.com reported, in an effort to counter what they think as the Vatican's concessions to the Chinese government.

Father Paul Dong Guanhua from Zhengding in northern Hebei Province announced last month that he was secretly ordained as a bishop, under special faculties that the Holy See granted to the Chinese Church following the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), which gives bishops the power to ordain successors in times of persecution, according to ucanews.com, a Catholic news agency.

Although many of his online posts have been deleted, some can still be found online in which he calls for priests who wanted to be ordained to contact him. "If we want to stick to our loyal faith, we will need to be organized, and that requires the special faculty," he

wrote in one online post. When approached by ucanews.com, he admitted that he had already ordained one bishop, but declined to disclose this person's identity.

However, the special faculty Father Dong relies on was officially withdrawn by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007. And although Dong has several hundred followers, his actions are considered radical and condemnable even in the underground church. Following his announcement, he was removed from position by Bishop Julius Jia Zhiguo of Zhengding, who is recognized by the Vatican but not the Chinese government.

Pope Benedict XVI's letter in 2007, however, also determined the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association is inconsistent with the Church's teaching.

"The news about these two ordinations are in themselves tentative of a boycott of the [China-Vatican] dialogue ... the Holy See will never recognize these two (or more) bishops," Giovagnoli said.

And at this critical moment, experts who champion the negotiations say it's important to deal with these challenges wisely. "It is important for China and the Vatican, I believe, not to get bogged down in these and other issues that can pop up from all over. It is important to deal with them with calm and without over-reacting: over reaction can make these problems bigger," Sisci said.

"If the top leaders on both sides, Pope Francis and President Xi Jinping, are determined, they will be able to overcome their own internal obstacles respectively," Yang said.

Anyang Nuns and priests demonstrate in Tianjin against government plans to demolish Church building

***The central government recognizes the Church's right to the property, but the local government refuses to hand it over and wants to profit from speculation.
An appeal to Xi Jinping to enforce the rule of law.***

AsiaNews.it (20.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2f9SDqt> - A group of nuns, priests and lay faithful from Anyang have staged a demonstration in Tianjin to ask for the restitution of a building owned by the diocese, which the local government wants to demolish, selling the land.

The demonstration attempt took place two days ago in front of the seat of government of the Hexi District (Tianjin), which occupies the building. But the protesters were stopped by the security personnel and some nuns were beaten.

The diocese of Anyang has a large number of buildings in Tianjin. Some of them were requisitioned during the rural reform movement of the Cultural Revolution. Under Deng Xiaoping's reform, Beijing established that private property was to be restored to the rightful owners, unless they were being used for purely social purposes. But in this case - as is frequently the case - although the government recognized the diocese of Anyang as the owner of the building, it has failed to hand it over for their use. In addition, the district government has planned to sell the land and destroy the building which is located in the city center and is very attractive from an economic point of view.

According to some believers, this case is a sign that "the religious policy of the Party's Central Committee is not followed by local governments".

The faithful have confidence "in Secretary Xi Jinping, [under whom] religious policies have improved, given that he pays much more attention to religious issues". In addition,

"the Party's Central Committee defends the rule of law, safeguarding the legal rights under the law." This is why they believe that "the property should be returned without undue difficulty".

According to research of the Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong, the turnover linked to the confiscated church property that has never been returned is around 130 billion yuan (13 billion euro).

China tries Christian church members on spying, illegal business charges

Radio Free Asia (19.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2eW4mZ8> - Authorities in southern China have tried two members of an unofficial Protestant "house church" on spying charges, while a third has been tried for "illegal business activities," lawyers and church members said on Wednesday.

Wang Yao and Yu Lei stood trial on Monday and Wednesday at the Guiyang Intermediate People's Court in the southwestern province of Guizhou on charges of "deliberately revealing state secrets," following an ongoing crackdown on their Huoshi Church by police and religious affairs officials.

"Wang Yao's trial was on Monday and Yu Lei's was on Wednesday," a fellow Huoshi church member who asked to remain anonymous told RFA.

"Wang Yao's family weren't allowed to attend the trial, and neither were two lawyers hired by her family to defend her," said the church member, who is under close surveillance by police and local officials.

"There have been people watching me in the past few days from my neighborhood committee and the local police station," the church member said.

"They follow me wherever I go. The police have placed very tight controls on all Huoshi Church members."

'Illegal business'

In Guangzhou, Li Hongmin stood trial on Monday for "running an illegal business" after being accused of printing more than 11,000 copies of 125 different Protestant tracts for distribution.

Li pleaded not guilty, and Beijing-based rights lawyers Li Boguang and Liu Peifu argued that Li was merely exercising a constitutional right to freedom of religion.

Li's trial was attended by around 20 close relatives, including his wife and parents, Guangfu Church pastor Ma Ke told RFA on Wednesday, adding that he was denied entry to the courtroom.

"I asked them why they wouldn't let me in, because I'd applied to add my name to the list a long time ago, and they said they didn't know, but they had to go by the list of names they had, and mine wasn't on it," Ma said.

"I just waited outside the court instead ... The lawyers told me that the material Li Hongmin had printed was all for internal circulation within the church," he said.

Torture, ill-treatment

Meanwhile, lawyers for Huoshi's pastor Yang Hua said he is suffering from a number of "serious health problems" following torture and ill-treatment during his detention.

Yang "has been suffering from serious health conditions and is suffering from liver pain along with various other serious diseases," lawyers Chen Jiangang and Zhao Yonglin told the U.S.-based Christian rights group ChinaAid.

"Prosecutors visited him twice, applied pressure to his feet, and repeatedly threatened to kill him and harm his family members if he failed to confess his supposed crimes," the group quoted the lawyers as saying.

Yang's lawyers said they plan to sue the prosecution team for "using torture to extract a confession."

ChinaAid said fellow Huoshi pastor Su Tianfu is also facing charges of "revealing state secrets," linked to reports on the persecution of Protestant house churches in China that were forwarded to foreign media organizations.

Controls on religion

The ruling Chinese Communist Party, which embraces atheism, exercises tight controls over any form of religious practice among its citizens.

China is home to an estimated 68 million Protestants, of whom 23 million worship in state-affiliated churches, and some nine million Catholics, 5.7 million of whom are in state-sponsored organizations.

The administration of President Xi Jinping regards Christianity as a dangerous foreign import, with officials warning last year against the "infiltration of Western hostile forces" in the form of religion.

A crackdown on Protestant churches in the eastern province of Zhejiang has widened and intensified to other regions of China during the past year, church members have told RFA.

Last month, China's cabinet, the State Council, released a draft set of draconian rules setting out measures aimed at eliminating unofficial Christian worship and "separatists" among Tibetans and Muslim Uyghurs.

They include bans on preaching or running religious events in schools and on "providing religious services online."

Individuals and groups are also prohibited from "organizing citizens to attend religious training, conferences, and activities overseas," according to a copy of the draft rules seen by RFA.

Some of the rules call on government agencies to "take precautions against separatism, terrorism, and infiltration by foreign forces."

They also impose restrictions on the acceptance of teaching posts in foreign countries, while a clause forbidding "religious activities in unapproved sites" calls on local governments to extend a nationwide crackdown on house churches not affiliated with the Three-Self Patriotic Association of government-approved churches.

Shrinking space

Beijing-based Xu Yonghai, who heads the Beijing Sheng'ai Protestant Family Church Fellowship, said the new rules represent a worsening of the environment for religious worship in China.

"The space for those of us with religious beliefs is getting smaller and smaller," Xu told RFA on Wednesday. "They are still tolerating smaller meetings held in people's homes, but they won't allow us to meet in large venues."

He said the authorities usually find some excuse to keep up the pressure even then.

"They'll say we can't meet at Zhang's house; we have to go to Li's house, or that we can't meet on a Sunday, and we have to meet on a different day," Xu said.

"We're hanging in there," he said.

Co-chairs to China: End demolitions of Tibetan Buddhist housing and expulsions of practitioners

Human Rights Commission (19.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2fAQ6RW> - Congressmen James P. McGovern and Joseph R. Pitts, Co-Chairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, today wrote to Ambassador Cui Tiankai of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to express their deep concern over the demolition of buildings belonging to the Tibetan Buddhist Institute at Larung Gar, and troubling reports of the forced eviction of religious adherents there and at Yachen Gar. Both communities are located in Sichuan province in China.

Between July and September of this year, an estimated 2,000 dwellings at the historic Tibetan Buddhist Institute in Larung Gar in Serta county were demolished, in response to a local directive that seeks to reduce the community's population from 10,000 people to no more than 5,000. The religious practitioners - nuns, monks and laypeople -- who inhabited the destroyed residences now face eviction from the community. According to one report, 2,000 nuns have already been required to leave Larung Gar and return to their hometowns in other provinces. The demolitions are planned to continue next year.

Since last April at Yachen Gar, another major monastic community in Pelyul county, as many as 1,000 nuns have been compelled to return to their homes in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). According to an informed source, the nuns who returned to their family homes in the TAR have been told that they may not join any monastery or nunnery there, or carry out public religious rituals or practices.

In their letter, the Co-Chairs urge the PRC central government to investigate the local and regional authorities responsible for the demolitions and expulsions, put an end to the policies, provide reparations for the damage to date, and allow Chinese and Tibetan Buddhists to practice their faith in peace.

The full text of the letter is available here [[PDF](#)].

114th Congress

China tells citizens to report parents who 'lure' kids into religion

By Thomas D. Williams, PH.D

In a new set of education rules, the Chinese Communist Party is urging citizens to spy on their neighbors and report parents who raise their children in a religious faith or have them attend religious services.

In the northwestern region of Xinjiang, the government released the new education norms on Wednesday, with special emphasis on religious formation, according to the U.S.-based human rights group China Aid.

The new rules, which will go into effect on November 1, stipulate that parents cannot "organize, lure or force minors into attending religious activities," or force them to wear religious dress or symbols. Moreover, they cannot even "tolerate" that children attend "underground scripture studies."

If parents are seen to be encouraging religion, "any group or person has the right to stop these kinds of behaviors and report them to the public security authorities," the norms state.

While China officially guarantees the right to religious freedom, the Communist Party tightly regulates religious activities, including religious education, and discourages minors from receiving religious formation.

Chinese law prohibits children under the age of 18 from receiving any religious education, and the government approved Christian church, the "Three-Self Patriotic Movement," explicitly bans its members from bringing their children up in the Christian faith, labeling the practice "brainwashing."

Earlier this year, the ruling Communist Party issued an ultimatum to parents that if children do not stop attending church, they will be barred from attending college or entering the military.

A government office in the central Guizhou province sent a notice to all of the schools in the area announcing the decision, in an effort to discourage citizens from attending independent house churches and to switch to a church under government control.

The severe policy of the ruling party has insisted on government dominion even over personal matters such as faith and family size.

At the time, government officials forced members of the Huaqiu Church into signing a document stating that they would no longer take minors to church. Now, Christian children attending the church are no longer eligible for the college entrance exam or admittance into a military academy. Moreover, parents who take their children to church are subject to punishment.

Authorities also announced the termination of welfare and social security benefits for Christians who are caught attending church services.

A local source said that practicing Christians would no longer be eligible for social security benefits or old-age insurance. County officials "called on the government in the towns and villages to order believers to sign [a guarantee], stating that if they gathered again, their welfare would be cut off," the source said.

The Chinese government has ratcheted up its persecution of “unofficial” religion not under government control, especially against Christianity, which is experiencing dramatic growth in the country.

In its annual report on international freedom released in August, the U.S. State Department denounced China’s continued suppression of religious liberty.

Despite China’s official policy of “freedom of religious belief,” the report states, in practice, “the government exercised state control over religion and restricted the activities and personal freedom of religious adherents when these were perceived to threaten state or Chinese Communist Party (CCP) interests.”

China’s new rules for Xinjiang ban parents from encouraging or forcing children into religion

South China Morning Post (12.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2h2mSjV> - Parents and guardians in China’s heavily Muslim region of Xinjiang who encourage or force their children into religious activities will be reported to police, the government said on Wednesday while unveiling new education rules.

Hundreds of people have died in recent years in Xinjiang, the far western home to the Muslim Uygur people, in unrest blamed by Beijing on Islamist militants and separatists, though rights groups say the violence is more a reaction to repressive Chinese policies.

The government strongly denies committing any abuses in Xinjiang and insists the legal, cultural and religious rights of the Uygur people are fully protected.

While China officially guarantees freedom of religion, minors are not supposed to participate in religious activity and authorities have cracked down on underground Muslim religious schools, or madrassas, in Xinjiang in recent years.

New education rules, to come into effect on November 1 and carried by the official Xinjiang Daily, say parents or guardians cannot “organise, lure or force minors into attending religious activities”.

Neither should they promote extremist beliefs in children, nor force them to dress in extremist clothing or other symbols, the newspaper said, echoing the tone of previous rules against beards for men or head coverings for women.

“Any group or person has the right to stop these kinds of behaviours and report them to the public security authorities,” the government said in the rules.

The rules also ban any form of religious activity in schools.

If parents are unable to properly guide their children away from harmful extremist or terrorist ways and they cannot continue to study at their existing schools, they can apply to have their children sent to specialist schools to “receive rectification”, the rules state.

Schools must guide students away from separatism and extremism, to create an environment that “esteems science, seeks the truth, refuses ignorance [and] opposes superstition”.

Many Uygurs resent restrictions on their culture and religion, and complain they are denied economic opportunities amid an influx of majority Han Chinese into Xinjiang.

China has locked up Uygurs who have campaigned for better treatment of their people, the most prominent being economics professor Ilham Tohti, jailed for life in 2014 on separatism charges.

He was awarded a prestigious annual human rights award on Tuesday, drawing an angry response from Beijing, which said he was a criminal who praised terrorists.

Mgr Peter Shao Zhumin back in Wenzhou but under control

The prelate and Fr Jiang Sunian were taken away to prevent them from attending the funeral of Mgr Zhu Weifang. The Vatican has confirmed Mgr Shao as bishop of Wenzhou. The faithful have been urged to stay calm.

AsiaNews.it (11.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2dZBOuJ> - Sources told AsiaNews that police took Mgr Peter Shao Zhumin (right, 1st photo) back to Wenzhou last Saturday (8 October) at 4.30 pm. His secretary (and diocese chancellor), Fr Paul Jiang Sunian (left, 1st photo), was with him. The Holy See recognises Mgr Bishop Shao; the government does not.

Police had taken the two clergymen, members of the diocese's underground community, on a trip, to Qinghai in the bishop's case, to Yunnan in his secretary's case.

Their "involuntary" holiday, more like an abduction, began on 23 August and was designed to keep the prelate away from the funeral of the city's bishop, Mgr Vincent Zhu Weifang, who passed away on 7 September.

From a canonical point of view, Mgr Shao, as ordained coadjutor bishop (with right of succession), is expected to replace the late Mgr Zhu with a mandate from the Holy See.

In a statement on 21 September, the Holy See Press Office, noted that "In accordance with canon law, Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin, coadjutor of the same diocese, succeeds the deceased prelate."

At present however, the bishop cannot perform his pastoral functions and is subject to police control.

In the diocese, both official and underground Catholics hold Mgr Shao in high esteem. The latter has had to endure imprisonment for his faith.

After a period of strong divisions between the official and underground communities, the two have seen acts of rapprochement and reconciliation even though, as one Catholic in Wenzhou noted, "the local government does everything to keep us divided".

In view of the situation, local Catholics have been urged to stay calm, to further their reconciliation and avoid giving the authorities any opportunity to retaliate or use violence.

Many believers fear that the government, regardless of Vatican canonical directives, will appoint another bishop, splitting again the Church in Wenzhou.

China seeks tighter grip in wake of a religious revival

The NY Times (07.10.2016) - <http://nyti.ms/2hL4mtr> - The finances of religious groups will come under greater scrutiny. Theology students who go overseas could be monitored more closely. And people who rent or provide space to illegal churches may face heavy fines.

These are among the measures expected to be adopted when the Chinese government enacts regulations tightening its oversight of religion in the coming days, the latest move by President Xi Jinping to strengthen the Communist Party's control over society and combat foreign influences it considers subversive.

The rules, the first changes in more than a decade to regulations on religion, also include restrictions on religious schools and limits on access to foreign religious writings, including on the internet. They were expected to be adopted as early as Friday, at the end of a public comment period, though there was no immediate announcement by the government.

Religion has blossomed in China despite the Communist Party's efforts to control and sometimes suppress it, with hundreds of millions embracing the nation's major faiths — Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Taoism — over the past few decades. But many Chinese worship outside the government's official churches, mosques and temples, in unauthorized congregations that the party worries could challenge its authority.

A draft of the new regulations was published in September, several months after Mr. Xi convened a rare leadership conference on religious policy and urged the party to be on guard against foreign efforts to infiltrate China using religion.

"It could mean that if you are not part of the government church, then you won't exist anymore," said Xiao Yunyang, one of 24 prominent pastors and lawyers who signed a public statement last month criticizing the regulations as vague and potentially harmful.

The regulations follow the enactment of a law on nongovernmental organizations that increased financial scrutiny of civil society groups and restricted their contact with foreign organizations in a similar way, as well as an aggressive campaign to limit the visibility of churches by tearing down crosses in one eastern province where Christianity has a wide following.

But the rules on religion also pledge to protect holy sites from commercialization, allow spiritual groups to engage in charitable work and make government oversight more transparent. That suggests Mr. Xi wants closer government supervision of religious life in China but is willing to accept its existence.

"There's been a recognition that religion can be of use, even in a socialist society," said Thomas Dubois, a professor at the Australian National University in Canberra. "There is an attempt, yes, to carve out the boundaries, but to leave a particular protected space for religion."

Although the governing Communist Party requires its 85 million members to be atheist, its leaders have lauded some aspects of religious life for instilling morality in the broader population and have issued directives ratcheting back the hard-line attacks on religion that characterized the Mao era.

Over the past decades this has permitted a striking religious renaissance in China, including a construction boom in temples, mosques and churches. Christianity is widely considered the fastest-growing faith; there are as many as 67 million adherents now, at

least half of whom worship in unregistered churches that have proliferated across China, sometimes called underground or house churches.

The new regulations are more explicit about the party's longstanding requirement that all religious groups register with the government, and the most vocal opposition so far has come from Protestant leaders unwilling to do so.

"These regulations effectively push house churches into taking on an illegal character," said Yang Xingquan, a lawyer who is one of the signatories of the public statement. "This is very clear."

Many Christians contend that government-approved churches are tools of the state, as sermons are vetted to avoid contentious political and social issues and clergy are appointed by the party rather than congregants or, in the case of the Catholic Church, the Vatican.

The new rules call for more stringent accounting practices at religious institutions, threaten "those who provide the conditions for illegal religious activities" with fines and confiscation of property, and require the many privately run seminaries in China to submit to state control.

Other articles in the regulations restrict contact with religious institutions overseas, which could affect Chinese Catholics studying theology in the Philippines, Protestants attending seminaries in the United States, or Muslims learning at madrasas in Malaysia or Pakistan.

Overseas churches and activists with ties to Chinese Christians have been scathing in their attacks on the new regulations. In its annual report on religious persecution released on Wednesday, China Aid, a group based in Texas, said they violated the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of religious belief.

The regulations also say for the first time that religion must not harm national security, which could give security services in China greater authority to target spiritual groups with ties overseas.

Chinese officials have already banned residents from attending some religious conferences in Hong Kong and increased oversight of mainland programs run by Hong Kong pastors, raising fears within the city's vibrant Christian community.

For traditional Chinese religions such as Buddhism and Taoism — which are practiced by 300 million to 400 million people and which the party views more favorably — the regulations appear intended to address a different problem: crass commercialization.

Temples are often forced by local governments to charge entrance fees, which mostly go to the state and not the place of worship. About 600 people were recently detained at Mount Wutai, a Buddhist pilgrimage site in a northeastern city, for posing as monks to hustle money by fortunetelling, begging for alms and performing street shows, the state news media reported.

The new regulations say spiritual sites should be "safeguarded" from tourism and development. The rules also require local governments to decide on applications to build houses of worship within 30 days and to explain denials in writing.

Scholars caution that it is unclear how strictly the regulations will be enforced, noting that local officials have often tolerated and sometimes encouraged religious activity that is formally illegal, including house churches.

"Past regulations have not harmed the growth of religion in China," said James Tong, a political-science professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, who has written extensively about religious regulation in China, "and I don't think these will, either."

Petition demands Beijing release underground bishop

UCA News (05.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2dUGR2S> - More than 22,000 people have signed an online petition demanding that Chinese authorities release a Vatican-approved bishop who has been taken to one of China's more remote provinces.

The signature campaign for the release of underground Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin, offered in seven languages on online petition website CitizenGO, is addressed to Chinese, American and European Union ambassadors.

Chinese authorities have "detained and re-located" Bishop Shao, "away from his home diocese," said the petition which added that authorities did this to stop him from being "installed as the new, senior bishop (and, full administrator) of Zhejiang (Wenzhou)."

Chinese bishop arrested as tension with Vatican grows

By Carey Lodge

Christian Today (09.09.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2cpffSN> - A Chinese bishop has been arrested by police and removed from his diocese in a city with a thriving Christian population.

Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin, coadjutor bishop of Wenzhou, was detained by authorities last week.

According to Asia News, which is affiliated with the Catholic Church, the bishop was set to take over from Bishop Vincent Zhu Weifang, who died from cancer on Wednesday.

The Chinese authorities do not recognise Bishop Shao's leadership because he is not part of the government's state-approved Catholic body, and was instead appointed by the Vatican.

Relations have historically been strained between the Catholic Church and China's ruling Communist party over irreconcilable claims to authority. The Vatican does not accept the validity of episcopal consecrations by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, and an underground Catholic Church refuses to compromise with the state and is loyal only to the Pope.

Bishop Shao was reportedly taken from his diocese to northwestern China "on a trip" and another priest is being held in detention in relation to his arrest.

According to AsiaNews, police have barred members of the underground Catholic church from attending Bishop Vincent's funeral.

Wenzhou is in China's eastern Zhejiang province and is known as the 'Jerusalem of the East' for reportedly having the largest Christian community in the country.

Zhejiang has been the centre of a government campaign that has seen 1,700 churches demolished or had their crosses removed.

The Communist party is believed by human rights campaigners to be becoming progressively more worried about the influence of Christianity in the country.

President Xi Jinping has called on China to return to traditional beliefs, such as Confucianism, rather than 'western' religions, and has introduced a hard-line approach to various parts of civil society, including religion.

UK, UN express concerns about freedom of religion or belief in China

CSW (20.09.2016) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide welcomes the United Kingdom's calls for China to safeguard freedom of religion or belief, expressed on 19 September in a statement at the 33rd Regular Session of the UN Human Rights Council.

The UK expressed concern about restrictions on freedom of religion or belief and expression in China, and stated that "new laws and regulations affecting media, NGOs and religious groups must expand the space for independent civil society and safeguard religious freedom and belief".

The comments echo concerns outlined by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein in his opening statement to the session on 13 September. The High Commissioner reiterated his deep concern over reports of continued harassment of human rights defenders and their family members, as well as allegations of discrimination, torture and ill-treatment, enforced disappearances and deaths in custody of members of ethnic and religious communities.

The remarks came alongside reports from Human Rights Watch and International Campaign for Tibet that Chinese authorities had reportedly forcibly removed over 1000 Tibetan Buddhists from religious institutions in Sichuan Province.

In July, a "renovation" campaign resulted in the demolition of hundreds of homes at Larung Gar Buddhist institute in Serta, Sichuan Province. Larung Gar is believed to be one of the largest Buddhist teaching centres in the world, with a population of over 10,000. Up to 1000 nuns at another Buddhist institution, Yachen Gar, have also been forced to leave the centre and go to their hometowns following an order by officials. The government has said that the centres are being renovated to address overcrowding and fire safety concerns. However, many of the people affected are reported to be deeply distressed, viewing the demolitions and the manner they are carried out as harassment. Three suicides have been reported in connection with these incidents.

Some observers have compared the demolitions to the cross removal campaign in Zhejiang Province, where hundreds of crosses have been removed and some churches completely demolished in a "rectification" campaign beginning in early 2014. Zhejiang was the site of the G20 summit earlier this month. Apparently in connection with the G20, on 28 August the government released five Christians arrested in April for "obstructing government administration" and "disturbing public order" after opposing a church demolition, according to China Aid.

However, sources also reported the shutting down of religious services and the detention of activists in preparation for the summit. Several Christians are also still in detention in connection with opposing the cross removal campaign; lawyer Zhang Kai, who provided legal advice to Christians in the province, has also been detained again after he stated publicly that comments that appeared to criticise fellow human rights lawyers were made

under duress. Zhang Kai was detained in August 2015 and released on bail in March after making a televised "confession" that supporters believe was coerced.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We welcome this statement by the UK and echo their call for China to safeguard freedom of religion or belief and to release those detained for peacefully exercising rights guaranteed by the Chinese Constitution and international law. We remain deeply concerned about reports of forced evictions and demolitions at Larung Gar Buddhist institute, as well as the ongoing detention of Christians who opposed cross removals in Zhejiang Province. We call on the Chinese authorities to uphold and protect the right to freedom of religion or belief for all people in China, regardless of ethnicity, registration status, religion or belief. We further urge the authorities to ensure that any changes made to religious sites in response to safety concerns are made in consultation with the communities affected, and that these actions in no way restrict their right to freedom of religion or belief."

Falun Gong practitioner Wang Zhiwen released in 2014 after 16 years in prison but...

HRWF (13.09.2016) - Danielle Wang was 19 when her father, Wang Zhiwen, was arrested on July 20, 1999 and later sentenced to 16 years in prison.

The elder Wang, 67, was one of the first coordinators of the former China Falun Dafa Association to be arrested when the Chinese Communist Party launched its persecution of the spiritual practice on July 20, 1999.

About two years after Mr. Wang's release, his daughter and son-in-law, both U.S. citizens, traveled to China to help him secure immigration documents to join them in the States but he is still denied family reunification in the U.S. Here is his story:

Personal statement by Wang Zhiwen on August 7, 2016

My name is Wang Zhiwen. I would like to briefly describe my experiences after being released from prison.

Upon my release from jail on October 18, 2014, the Ministry of Public Security sent me straight to a "brainwashing center" (Xicheng District Legal Study Class) in Beijing's Changping District. I only returned home on October 25.

My home environment was set up for surveillance: Four infrared security cameras were trained on my doorstep. I found out that a pump house opposite my apartment was used as a surveillance spot. The national security system arranged two shifts of agents to monitor me daily. Security agents were at all times aware of my comings and goings, and who I was in contact with. My neighbors are very clear on my situation.

Additionally, in the name of "maintaining social stability," members of the local resident's community and property staff were at times deployed to keep an eye on me.

Surveillance involved methods like wiretapping my telephone, and shadowing my person. The security details definitely make arrangements for periods that they consider sensitive. This type of surveillance has disrupted my personal life and artificially isolates me from the man in the street.

After being freed, I thought constantly of reuniting with my daughter. Due to special circumstances, I alone applied for my passport to realize a reunion in the United States. Police officers, however, read my mind.

In November 2014, the Xicheng District immigrations authorities rejected my application for a passport. Immigrations officials verbally told me that they wouldn't process my application because I was under restrictions. I couldn't find any such regulation online.

Over time, there was a change in my situation. In January 2016, I obtained a Chinese passport after submitting an application through official channels online. Then I began the process of arranging a reunion with my daughter, Wang Xiaodan, by applying for a U.S. visa.

During this process, the police interfered on several occasions:

(1) In February and March 2016, police officers Li Yajun and Wang Tongli from Xicheng's Yuetan area paid me a visit at home, and demanded that I hand over my passport to them. They would return my passport should I need to use it, they said. I felt that this wasn't necessary, and refused to surrender my passport.

In a subsequent telephone call, officer Li said his superior wanted to have a word with me at the police station. I knew my answer would reflect my stance on the matter of my passport, and told Li to tell his superiors that I saw no need to make a trip to the station. If they really wish to speak with me, I said, they can look me up at my home.

What I was indicating to officer Li is this: I had obtained my passport through official channels. While I wasn't successful previously, my application has since been approved, and my passport is definitely legitimate.

(2) After I refused to surrender my passport on another occasion, police officers told me: "we've already cancelled your passport."

(3) In July 2016, agents from the Ministry of Public Security increased their surveillance over me. From observing me at a distance, they shifted in close and never left my side. Day and night, I was being watched by two details of agents.

Everywhere I went—a trip to the market, a casual stroll, or even to the barber—I was closely followed by security agents. Some of these agents even walked up to me and asked, "Where have you been today?" Such was the degree of their familiarity with me.

(4) At around 10 a.m. on July 31, officer Liu, the deputy director of police in the Yutan area, led three of his subordinates from the Xicheng subdivision to my home. One of the policemen was officer Wang Tongli, and another went by the name Sun.

Liu said: You want to leave the country, but according to regulations, those whose rights are restricted aren't allowed to travel. From today on, you have to submit an application to the police station if you wish to leave Beijing.

I told them that their surveillance over me was solely their own concern, and that I didn't acknowledge their commands. After all, I had gotten my passport through formal channels, and if they had an issue with that, they should check with their superiors. I learned on the internet that there clearly isn't any restriction on my person since my passport was obtained formally and legally.

If there were really any regulations, then the onus would be on the police to show me the relevant documents, I said.

Officer Liu replied that their communicating and clarifying the issue with me at my home was the furthest they could go to accommodate me.

During the conversation, I noted that their harassment—like taking photos of me the moment I speak with others—has severely disrupted my life. The police officers told me to bring this up with their superiors.

(5) On the evening of July 31, I eluded their surveillance (three agents remained on my tail though), and journeyed to Guangzhou to get my U.S. visa.

Agents from the public security system tracked me down again at a medical center in Guangdong, and they resumed surveillance after I obtained my U.S. visa from the Consulate General of the United States in Guangzhou.

Between 9 to 11 p.m. on August 5, officers from a local police station and over 20 others showed up on the doorstep of my rented room. My landlord even came over personally and demanded to be let in on the pretext that about a dozen people were engaging in "illegal activities" in my apartment. But at the stern insistence of my entourage, those at my door were turned away, and the situation didn't escalate further.

(6) On the morning of August 6, I gathered up all my legally obtained documents, including my Chinese passport and U.S. visa, and tried to enter Hong Kong to catch a flight. At the ferry customs in Dongguang, an immigrations officer checked my passport, and asked: "Have you misplaced your passport? It says online that your passport has been cancelled." Later, the officer said: "No reason was given for the cancellation of your passport; the cancellation was done by the internal bureaus of the Public Security Ministry."

In the attempt to join my daughter in America, I had to go through a very long process of securing travel documents. I had to prepare various materials and spend some money. My family had also invested their hopes and expectations in my leaving China, while many others had also showed concern and support.

But now I'm left with this outcome due to the handiwork of some department in the Ministry of Public Security.

I've only briefly described my experiences. It's really shocking that some in the public security system have appropriated the power of the state apparatus and used devious means to terminate a long-distance family reunion.

To reiterate, I wish to travel to the United States to reunite with my daughter. I applied for my passport in accordance with proper procedures, and I had legitimately obtained my passport.

What has befallen me is a real incident in Chinese society. I call upon everyone to take notice.

Christian camp leaders detained, accused of 'indoctrinating minors'

By Qiao Nong, Carolyn Song, and Ava Collins

China Aid (12.09.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2cbGYnT> - Two organizers of a Christian summer camp were detained in China's northwestern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, for 10 and 15 days, respectively, on Aug. 4 on the charge of indoctrinating minors with superstitious beliefs.

Zhou Yanhua and Gao Ming, both members of Yining County Church, were preparing to drive a group of children to a summer camp when, half an hour before they were set to depart, police arrived to detain the two women and take all of the children present to the police station to register their IDs.

An elder from Yining County Church, Xie Xianhua, said officials also called the families and school teachers of the children involved, threatening to deduct the teachers' wages or keep the students from being admitted to higher grade levels.

Authorities detained Gao, a 27-year-old seminary student at Yanjing Theological Seminary, for 15 days. Zhou, the head of the church sponsoring the summer camp,

received a 10-day detention after she told police that she was the organizer of the event in an attempt to free Gao.

Both women were accused of indoctrinating minors with superstitious beliefs. Chinese law forbids religious teaching to anyone under the age of 18, believing matters of faith to be dangerous brainwashing from which children must be protected. Christian parents and church leaders can face disciplinary action from officials for involving their children in any Christian activities.

Gao's status as a student at an official, government-sanctioned seminary reveals that not only house churches are at risk for government suppression. Members of China's official Protestant church, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, are also targeted.

A conversation on the Chinese messaging application WeChat between fellow Yanjing Theological Seminary students discussing Gao's detention has been translated below.

China Aid condemns the actions of authorities against Zhou, Gao, and the children involved in this case, and reports on such events to expose abuses by the Chinese government and promote religious freedom.

WeChat group of Xinjiang Yanjing Seminary students (31)

Zou: Here is the situation: Ordinary lawyers wouldn't dare handle such a case.

Chen: Gao Ming sent me a message saying she would be detained for 15 days. Let's pray for our dear coworkers quietly and ask the Lord to help us act with wisdom and make use of every possibility to do the work the Lord has given us to do.

Luo: Pray for this!

Zou: May the Lord strengthen the faith of the co-workers, strengthen the church and also protect the children could continuously follow the Lord. [Praying hands]

Jiang: Gao Ming was detained the day before yesterday. She will be kept in detention for 15 days. Her phone was taken away. Please do not contact her, but pray for her. We have been trying to get her out before that. Please pray for this.

Zou: Also, pray for the parents and the kids. It is [becoming] common to be detained because of things like this.

Han: [Praying hands]

Cui: Let's pray!

Zou: The kids were taken home the very night by their parents, principals, and teachers. They were terrified. May the Lord bless these kids.

Wenzhou releases five prisoners in preparation for G20 summit

By Qiao Nong, Carolyn Song, and Ava Collins

China Aid (30.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2chbuhp> - Five Christian detainees in China's coastal Zhejiang were suddenly released on Aug. 28 after four months in prison. Local sources believe the release came because of a government order in preparation for the upcoming G20 summit meeting in Hangzhou.

Ji Qingcao, Ji Qingcou, Ou Jinsi, Mei Xueshun, and He Lijing are members of Yazhong Church who were arrested last April on the charges of "obstructing government administration" and "disturbing public order."

Beginning on September 25, 2015, a group of people, including the five prisoners, came into conflict with authorities while protesting a planned demolition of Guankou Church. Over the next year, many of those involved in the protests were detained or arrested for various reasons, of which the April arrests were the latest.

"A few days ago, I'd heard that [the five Christians] had been released in the past few days," a Wenzhou Christian told China Aid's reporter. "I feel like the government is trying to pacify the people before the summit meeting. Since the summit meeting will be held here [on September 4], the government begins to worry that they have detained the Christians for too long. The local government was concerned about petitions organized by the family members, thinking higher officials would pressure them."

Though the five from Yazhong Church have been released, Wen Xiaowu, the leader of a house church in Rui'an is still being held and has not been heard from since his arrest on April 15. Wen was detained with his wife, Xiang Lihua, and their son, on the charge of "gathering a crowd to disturb public order" after travelling to meet with diplomatic officers at the American Embassy in Shanghai.

China Aid raises awareness for prisoners of conscience in China who are detained unlawfully like Wen Xiaowu, and works to secure the releases of detainees such as the five Christians of Yazhong Church.

In China-Holy See talks, silence shrouds future of underground priests

Later this year, all priests must register to receive a certificate that allows them to exercise their ministry. But the request has to go through the Patriotic Association, whose statutes are "incompatible" with Catholic doctrine. Many priests, official and unofficial, now face an enormous dilemma.

AsiaNews.it (18.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2cozUGW> - Here at AsiaNews we have received and gladly publish this urgent appeal from a priest in South China.

Frequent appeals for help are arriving from the underground Catholic Chinese clergy, this year. They find themselves in a very difficult and serious dilemma: they are being forced to register by accepting the Catholic Patriotic Association with its three autonomy principles.

But, it seems that nobody cares for them. The public attention of all Catholics concerned with the Church in China is drawn elsewhere: it is focused upon the possible results of the ongoing negotiations between the Holy See and the Chinese Government. A lot of speculations have come out, either in favor or against them, but they kept mainly related to the issues of the election of Chinese Bishops and of the eventual diplomatic mutual recognition.

Card. John Tong, Bishop of Hong Kong, has intervened with a very balanced article emphasizing the need for dialogue and trying to solve all fears and critiques of those who do not agree with or oppose the negotiations. However, the main concern remains on top-level issues. The daily problems and difficulties of Chinese clergy and faithful do not seem to receive a proper attention. The above raised issue of the registration of the

Catholic clergy deserves special attention, also within these official negotiations: it can pave the way for a solution of other issues. And it is rather urgent!

On February 13, the Global Times reported that China is now launching a massive campaign to check and register the identities of all religious workers: the certificate to be issued records the religious name, secular name, national ID card number and a unique number assigned to every individual religious operator. The campaign started with Buddhist monks but soon extended to Taoist and Catholic priests, who will have to apply for certificates by the end of this year. If a priest's, monk's or religious site's certificate application is rejected by the authorities, the applicant will not be granted a certificate by the concerned religious association. According to the State Administration for Religious Affairs regulations, those without certificates are forbidden from engaging in religious activities.

Following this, on February 25, in a meeting with officials from the State Administration for Religious Affairs and the Communist Party's United Front Work Department, Catholic leaders of the two government-controlled official organizations in China, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the so-called Bishops' Conference, have unsurprisingly endorsed the 2016 work plans that the country's authorities laid out for them. They not only will ordain bishops "under the leadership of the government" but also register the official clergy and forced unregistered clergy into the open church, requiring them to apply for the identity certificate.

Consequently, all the underground priests find themselves in a serious dilemma, since, in order to be able to carry on pastoral ministry, they have to apply for the registration through the Catholic Patriotic Association, accepting its principle of the autonomy, independence and democratic administration of the Church. Many of them are really in trouble and in pain for such a situation, since it goes against their faith, and do not know out to get out of it. Even several official priests are not happy about such a measure, because it creates further troubles.

People can wonder why the negotiations between the Holy See and Beijing do not deal with such an issue. Their official registration of the clergy is indeed desirable, but why they should apply for the identity certificate through the Patriotic Catholic Association and not simply through the State Administration for Religious Affairs or through other civil organs, as in other nations? Possible solutions seem to be available.

Chinese authorities question students in Xinjiang about religious habits

By Gulchehra Ghoja, Mamatjan Juma, and Brooks Boliek

Radio Free Asia (15.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2c2NRF2> - The Chinese government is asking school children in the northwestern Xinjiang region to tell authorities who in their family prays, who wears a hijab, and who wears a beard, sources tell RFA's Uyghur Service.

While the sources say all middle and high school students in Aksu (in Chinese, Akesu) and Hotan (Hetian) prefectures are required to fill out a questionnaire telling authorities of their families' religious activities, wardrobe and facial hair, the action appears to be directed at the region's Muslim Uyghurs.

The hijab, a daily routine of prayer and a beard are all hallmarks of Muslim practices.

A Uyghur teacher from Aksu region, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told RFA that the regional educational department prepared a questionnaire that contains questions

like: "Is there anybody in your house who prays? Is there anybody who wears a hijab or has a beard? What kind of religious activities do they conduct? What kind of religious books are there in your house?"

During a meeting about the form, Chinese authorities told educators that it was designed to curb the religious and separatist ideology of students entering the schools, the sources told RFA.

'They tell us not to do any religious activities'

A student from a Kashgar village and a guard at the village school in Hotan's Lop county confirmed the questionnaire's existence and contents, but said that similar forms have been issued before.

"After we finish filling out the form, we take it to school, and the school collects them," said the student who also spoke on condition of anonymity.

"They do it every year,' the student explained. "We are on summer break, but we are gathered at the school every Friday, and they tell us not to do any religious activities and such."

The guard, who also declined to be identified, told RFA that the questionnaire has to be stamped by authorities and presented at the school.

"There should be stamps on it," the guard said. "Both police and government. The students bring in the forms themselves. They are in Uyghur for the Uyghur students and Chinese for the Chinese students."

Attempts by RFA to reach higher authorities about the questionnaire were unsuccessful.

China has vowed to crack down on what it calls religious extremism in Xinjiang, and regularly conducts "strike hard" campaigns including police raids on Uyghur households, restrictions on Islamic practices, and curbs on the culture and language of the Uyghur people, including videos and other material.

But experts outside China say Beijing has exaggerated the threat from Uyghur "separatists" and that domestic policies are responsible for an upsurge in violence there that has left hundreds dead since 2012.

Steps away from freedom, American family loses bid to rescue father from China

By Leo Timm

The Epoch Times (10.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bfZW9g> - When Danielle Wang and her husband arrived in Beijing late in July to meet her father, what should have been a joyful reunion was tainted with palpable anxiety and concern.

Wang Zhiwen is one of China's most heavily persecuted political prisoners. In 1999, he was put through a show trial and handed a highly publicized 16-year prison sentence for his role as a volunteer coordinator of the Falun Gong spiritual discipline. The Communist Party's ferocious persecution of the practice was just getting underway, and Wang's heavy sentence was meant as a warning to the public.

Even now, Wang is watched 24/7 by Chinese plainclothes police details and a large number of undercover informants.

On a mission to bring the elder Wang to the United States, his daughter and son-in-law stepped into the web of round-the-clock surveillance and harassment.

The family secured a Chinese passport issued in January and a visa from the American consular authorities for Wang, who managed to evade scores of undercover agents and plainclothes officers. Despite these efforts, Wang was stopped by customs officers on Aug. 6, just before gaining entry to Hong Kong.

There, officers snatched his passport and clipped off a corner of the document, invalidating it. They gave no explanation, other than that it had been cancelled.

According to human rights researchers, Falun Gong practitioners have been incarcerated by the millions over the 17 years of repression. Thousands have been confirmed dead by torture in or shortly after release from custody, while ongoing investigations indicate that adherents are the primary victims of organ harvesting, a large and profitable industry.

"I think there's really no way of imagining what China is under this communist regime unless you go there," said Danielle's husband Jeff Nenarella, in an interview soon after getting back from China. "I've been reading articles about practitioners persecuted in China for years, and it never hit me like it hit me when I went there."

Intimidation and harassment

Danielle Wang (Chinese name Xiaodan Wang), who came to the United States as a student in 1998, has been struggling to obtain freedom for her father ever since he was illegally arrested on July 20, 1999, the day the Communist Party rolled out its brutal and long-standing campaign against the group.

For this trip, she and Nenarella arrived unannounced. They also risked being jailed and abused, despite their status as American citizens. Any communication with mainland China was at risk of being intercepted. The couple has been guarded about how they managed to arrange this rendezvous ahead of time.

The three left the capital for the Chinese south, where Danielle planned to collect her father's visa from the American Consulate in Guangzhou. During the elder Wang's exodus, his daughter fended off multiple monitors bent on keeping her father under watch.

Once out of Beijing, the three boarded a flight to Guangzhou. But that too had been fraught with interference. Days earlier, Wang's pre-ordered ticket was inexplicably cancelled, forcing them to get one by other means. A local policeman had come to his home to question him about his purchase and to warn him not to attempt emigration.

But once they arrived in the south, Wang's minders had traced him there, and took new measures. On the day that Danielle went to the American Consulate to get her father's visa, three men posing as electrical maintenance workers loitered outside their rented room, trying to peer inside via the peephole.

That night, between 20 and 30 police officers pounded on the door, demanding to be let in for the ostensible purpose of confirming Nenarella's travel papers. Over the next three days, about 10 police and agents shadowed the trio right up until they tried to enter Hong Kong, to travel on to the United States.

Still, the couple was hopeful. The fact that Wang had been able to get a passport—a document issued by the Ministry of Public Security—indicated that he would have a good chance at emigration.

This was a sea change from when Wang was in prison, sandwiched between inmates, deprived of sleep, and having toothpicks jammed under his fingernails. In the early years of his imprisonment, Wang lost his teeth from beatings; both of his collarbones were broken and not properly set. He was forced to do slave labor, and his shackles over 50 pounds. He suffered a stroke just before his release in 2014.

“This time I was really optimistic,” said Danielle upon arriving at the Newark International Airport empty handed on Aug. 9. “My father got a passport and completed all the immigration processes. I was confident I could get my father out.”

According to Wang, the customs officials who destroyed her father’s passport, and with it years of effort to rescue him, claimed the travel documents had been voided by “internal bureaus” of the Ministry of Public Security.

Who wants to stop Wang Zhiwen?

To Nenarella, that Wang’s passport was issued by the national authorities without incident, only to be voided and destroyed without any sort of legal rationale, points to subversion of central power.

“My understanding is that it has to be approved at the higher levels of the regime,” he said, pointing to the highly politically sensitive nature of Wang’s case.

According to Nenarella, a few months after Wang received his passport, some police came to his house and were confused as to how he obtained it.

While the Chinese Communist Party has never formally changed its stance on Falun Gong, the current leadership is locked in political struggle with the faction of Jiang Zemin, the nearly 90-year-old retired Party boss who began the persecution and used it as an opportunity to push his own lieutenants into positions of power.

As many of these formerly made men fall in the anti-corruption campaign led by current Chinese regime leader Xi Jinping (a man with no career investment in suppressing Falun Gong), there have been many indications that Party Central has lost interest in the spiritual practice. But persecution continues on the back burner.

Danielle Wang is still determined to reunite with her father.

“This experience has steeled my determination to tell my father’s story to people around the world, to governments and the media, until he can be rescued.”

Their brief, bittersweet reunion began much as it had started: with the father’s concern for his family’s safety. The day after customs turned him away, he saw the couple off as they left for North America.

“He didn’t tell me where he would go from here,” Danielle said. “I’ve lost him again.”

Danielle Wang has started a petition on Care2 addressed to Secretary of State John Kerry, asking him to pressure the Chinese Communist Party to reissue her father’s passport and allow him to travel abroad.

30 Christians held by police in government crackdown

By Qiao Nong, Carolyn Song, and Brynne Lawrence

China Aid (28.07.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2ddVFp6> - Government personnel in China's southern Guangdong province seized 30 members of a house church in early July and took them to a local station for interrogation.

On the morning of July 10, officials from the religious affairs bureau and police department interrupted Olive Tree Church's weekly worship service and took pictures of the scene. After confiscating church property, they took 30 of the congregants to the police station for questioning, sealed the church building and banned its members from meeting.

They also summoned Jiang Jianping, a church leader, and charged him with, "conducting activities in the name of a social organization without registration." When Jiang Jianping's mother was brought to the police station, she collapsed and was rushed to a hospital.

Authorities released most of the church members later that day, but four of them, including Jiang Jianping and Tan Xiuhong, a lawyer in England, were officially detained for four days.

According to local Christians, this was the worst persecution event their church experienced since Sept. 21, 2014, when more than 100 police officers raided Olive Tree Church and Ark Church and apprehended six Christians, including Tan Xiuhong, a lawyer who practices in England. That night, their families received notices stating they had been charged with "using a cult organization to undermine law enforcement."

China Aid exposes abuses, such as those suffered by Olive Tree Church, in order to support and stand in solidarity with persecuted Christians.

China to shut churches in G20 host city on safety grounds – reports

Residents of Hangzhou told they could be banned from holding religious gatherings while world leaders attend summit

The Guardian (22.07.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bFTLCf> - Chinese authorities have reportedly ordered the closure of churches in the eastern city hosting the G20 summit later this year to "create a safe environment" for world leaders when they meet.

Heads of state will fly into Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang province, in early September for the two-day meeting hosted by the Chinese president, Xi Jinping.

In an effort to reduce congestion, local officials have declared a week-long public holiday to coincide with the G20 summit and are reportedly trying to convince thousands of residents to leave town.

Now reports have emerged that authorities are also banning religious worship during the annual summit.

The Global Times, a Communist party-run tabloid, said Xiaoshan, a district in south-east Hangzhou where the G20 meeting will be held, had outlawed large-scale religious

activities until four days after the event. It said the move was an attempt "to create a safe environment for the meeting".

One Hangzhou pastor told the newspaper authorities had shut down a number of underground "house churches" in the city.

Another report, by the US-backed news service Radio Free Asia, said the city's unofficial churches had been ordered to stop gathering.

"They have been forcing house churches not to meet ahead of the G20 summit," said Zhang Mingxuan, the outspoken president of China's House Church Alliance.

Li Guisheng, a Christian human rights lawyer, criticised the move and said it had no basis in Chinese law.

"I cannot understand why they have done this... Worshipping God has nothing to do with the G20 summit."

Zhejiang province is known as the most Christian region in China, an officially atheist country that is home to tens of millions of churchgoers.

Since late 2013 the coastal province has been the setting for a controversial Communist party cross removal campaign.

Demolition teams armed with sledgehammers, blowtorches and cranes have removed crosses from more than 1,200 places of worship, activists say.

Several churches have been completely torn down and bloody clashes have broken out between congregants fighting to defend the symbol of their faith and truncheon-wielding security guards sent to enforce the demolitions.

Opponents of the campaign have faced government retribution.

Gu Yue, a prominent pastor from one Hangzhou mega-church who had spoken out against the cross removal campaign, was detained in January for allegedly misusing church funds and only recently released.

Zhang Kai, a Christian lawyer who also fought the removals, spent months in secret detention and was forced to make a televised "confession".

On Friday, a Foreign Office report on the deteriorating human rights situation in China highlighted the plight of the country's Christian community.

The report pointed to the destruction of a large number of Chinese churches, the disappearance of Catholic priests and the detention of Protestant pastors and their parishioners.

Chinese house churches were facing a period of "sustained pressure" from Beijing, the Foreign Office said.

Chinese authorities bring demolition of Buddhist Larung Gar center forward

The center houses up to 10 thousand Tibetan and Chinese people. The authorities want to reduce the number of monks and nuns. They suspect that

the monastery has ties with "separatist forces in exile". Religious freedom shrinking since Xi Jinping became president. Similar to case of Zhejiang's crosses and churches.

AsiaNews.it (22.07.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bg0r3c> - Chinese workers, accompanied by police, soldiers and government representatives, started demolishing the residences of monks and structures of the Buddhist center of Larung Gar, Sertar County (Kardze, Sichuan). The demolition began on July 20 at 8 am (click to see video)

Larung Gar is the largest institute of Tibetan studies in the world, with a population of over 10 thousand people, Tibetan and Chinese.

The Chinese authorities have justified the destruction as a safety measure because the place is overcrowded and to make way for a road. The decision was not, however, previously agreed with inhabitants.

Last June, the authorities issued an ordinance calling for the reduction to 5 thousand the number of people in the monastery (1500 monks and 3500 nuns before Oct. 2017). The order dated October 30 this year for the beginning for the relocation of residents and demolition. The order also detailed a series of punishments if residents failed to obey, including the complete demolition of the monastery.

Many believe the order is unjust and another way to reduce - and possibly eliminate - the center suspected of having links with "separatist forces in exile".

A young student, a resident of the monastery, tells Free Tibet the order is contradictory: "If the only way to solve overpopulation is destroying the houses, why is the same policy not applied to Chinese cities where the population is overcrowded? Where is the equality, the rule of law, the public good, religious freedom and equal rights for all (as they say), if you destroy the homes of innocent faithful who live their simple life? "

Meanwhile, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro and Khenpo Rigdar, two eminent religious figures of the center, have asked students to "remain calm", "continue their studies" and to "avoid making demonstrations."

Acharya Yeshe Phuntsok, vice president of the Tibetan Parliament in exile accused China's leadership: "Since Xi Jinping became President of China religious freedom in Tibet has visibly deteriorated".

The demolition of Larung Gar closely resembles the demolition of crosses and churches in Zhejiang and other Chinese provinces, designed to put under control the effervescence of the Christian communities marked by rapid growth.

China vs Huaqiu Church: authorities threaten parents, force children to stay away from church

Communist officials launch a campaign of intimidation against a community in Central Guizhou Province. The aim is to force its members to join the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the mainland's state-controlled Protestant Church. Taking one's children to church can lead to a law suit.

AsiaNews.it (16.07.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bfTLCf> - Chinese authorities have launched a campaign of intimidation against a Protestant Church, threatening to sue its members and bar their children from college, this according to ChinaAid, a Texas-based group that advocates for human rights in China.

According to the group, parents who attend the Huaqiu Church, a house church in central Guizhou province, were told that if they didn't stop bringing their children to church, the latter would not be allowed to attend college or to a military academy.

In addition, parents were told that if they continued to bring their underage children to church they would be sued.

Rev Mou, head of the Huaqiu Church, said a notice detailing these rules was sent to local schools.

"They intend to cleanse us and ask us to join the Three-Self Patriotic Movement," he explained. The latter is China's state-approved Protestant Church.

As part of the campaign, the Church has been prevented from holding Sunday services over the past two weeks. "Huaqiu is in a dark place," Mou lamented.

In recent years, China has used an iron fist against religious groups, especially Christians whose numbers have been growing exponentially.

In three years, the authorities have also demolished or removed the crosses to more than 1,500 churches in the province of Zhejiang.

Pastors and lawyers who oppose the campaign have been imprisoned on false or specious charges.

USCIRF condemns the government's Ramadan restrictions

USCIRF (06.07.2016) - <http://bit.ly/29mJCW8> - As Muslims around the world mark the end of Ramadan with Eid al-Fitr celebrations, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) strongly condemns the Chinese government's restrictions on Uighur and other Muslims' religious practices. These restrictions are particularly egregious during this month-long period of introspection, fasting, prayer, and devotion.

"The Chinese government once again has banned government employees, students, and children from fasting, and in some cases praying, during Ramadan," said USCIRF Chair Thomas J. Reese, S.J. *"While restrictions on Uighur Muslims' religious practices take place year round, they are particularly onerous during Ramadan, giving lie to the government's claim that Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang enjoy religious freedom. They do not. The Chinese government is violating its own constitution and international human rights standards by denying religious freedom to its citizens."*

The government imposed Ramadan restrictions this year after it issued a June white paper, *Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang*, that highlights the supposed religious freedom experienced by people of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, where the majority of China's Uighur Muslim population lives. The paper alleges that the government protects "normal" religious activities and respects citizens' religious needs and customs.

Rather than recognize that the vast majority of Uighur Muslims peacefully practice their faith, Chinese regional and central governments treat the entire Uighur community as potential violent terrorists whose "extreme religious activities" must be monitored, controlled, and restricted.

To these ends, local authorities throughout the year seek to ban any visible Islamic expression, including men's beards and women's face-covering veils, and prohibit children under 18 from practicing any religion. Authorities also regularly surveil mosques and harass religious adherents.

The government's crackdown since 2009 on religious activities and expression in Xinjiang has led to the detention and deaths of hundreds of Uighur Muslims, fueling resentment and the very extremism the government claims it is trying to quell.

For more information, please see USCIRF's China chapter in the 2016 Annual Report (in [English](#) and [Chinese](#)). See also the following press release about Professor Ilham Tohti's life sentence: [USCIRF Calls on the Release of Ilham Tohti and other Prisoners of Conscience](#).

Threats from authorities force Guangdong house church to move

By Qiao Nong, Carolyn Song and Brynne Lawrence

China Aid (05.07.2016) - <http://bit.ly/29lgNaM> - A house church was forced to move last month after officials in China's southern Guangdong province closed the building and pressured the landlady to terminate the church's contract.

Paul, an elder from Guangfu Church, said in an interview on June 16 that police came to the church, saying they needed to check its temporary residential permit. However, they took pictures and inspected the fire hydrant. After deeming it below safety standards, they closed the church on pretenses that it hadn't registered with the government and its firefighting system was inadequate.

In a meeting with Ma "Mark" Chao, the person in charge of the church, the authorities told him that he could not participate in any more church services due to previous quarrels with government officials.

Additionally, Ma received a phone call from the church's landlady, who informed him that she wished to terminate their contract eight years before its expiration because officials had pressured her. As a result, the church was forced to move out of its building.

China Aid reports abuses, such as those suffered by the members of Guangfu Church, in order to promote religious freedom and rule of law in China.

Mgr Ma Daqin, the Vatican and the Patriotic Association's "crooked logic"

A priest in central China looks at the bishop of Shanghai's volte-face, comparing him to John the Baptist who was jailed after he accused Herod. Because of their crooked logic, the Patriotic Association and the government seek to eliminate religion from the country. The Vatican is in danger of contradicting itself if it makes compromises with the Patriotic Association. Pope Benedict XVI described the latter as "incompatible" with Catholic doctrine in his Letter to Chinese Catholics, which Pope Francis has never disclaimed, but has instead reiterated.

By Gu Feng

AsiaNews.it (30.06.2016) - <http://bit.ly/29Hk7gS> - John the Baptist's witness to the world can be traced even to the time before his birth. The Angel Gabriel gave him a name and prophesied what life he would live and the things he would do.

The Bible intentionally avoids reporting John's secular life until he went into the wilderness. John is closely related to God and with Jesus Christ. When he was still in the womb, he leapt for joy when he met with Jesus. John grew with a strong spirit and lived in the wilderness until the Messiah began to preach. When John saw Jesus approaching him to receive the baptism, he humbly pointed at Him and proclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"! This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.'"

However, toward Herod and the Jews, John was extremely critical, straightforward, and outspoken, hitting the nail on the head and raising opposition.

John was a Man of God. He baptized others, so they could repent. Moreover, he spoke out against sin, even when facing imprisonment. He spoke the truth, to testify to the light, and illuminate the darkness of the human heart.

Mgr Ma Daqin goes into the wilderness

Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin wrote five articles in the past six months. Although the former four articles seem to have laid some groundwork and preparation for the fifth one, only the fifth one, when it came out, caused a strong shock among the Chinese, the Church in China, and the universal Church.

The Patriotic Association, which is a government-controlled grassroots organization, should not have become a problem for the Catholic Church. Why has it become an unescapable problem? Perhaps because, now as in the past, it has created a dilemma in many local churches!

At the ordination on July 7, 2012, Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin voluntarily left the Patriotic Association, and this made those who support religious freedom policy lose face (at least as the authorities define such freedom). Consequently, Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin was restricted and forced to live in the Sheshan seminary, like in the wilderness, for four years. It has been a high price for leaving the Patriotic Association.

This shows that, in fact the "government-controlled" Patriotic Association, a so called "self-formed service organization" established within the Church, interferes with the policy of religious freedom that is written in the Chinese Constitution.

This is, indeed, a paradox: it determines the necessity of the presence of the Chinese Patriotic Association. Since, on principle, this is an organization spontaneously formed by faithful Catholics, it shows that religious freedom is present with no outside interference. If there is a contradiction, it is only internal. If it needs to be resolved, it needs something that can guarantee justice. This way, the Religious Affairs Department, which is run by the government, can legally intervene and its role is even justified. This means that they can resolve all the conflicts within the Church by themselves. This way of doing things does not contradict the Chinese Constitution, limits religious freedom, and can eventually eliminate religion (this has been the government's dream).

Patriotic Association's crooked logic

Chinese people can easily understand this form of "logic" better than non-Chinese people. "Logic" is a word introduced from outside, which is tied with truth and justice.

Otherwise, it is not "logical". However, Chinese people are able to make "obscurities", "sophistry" and tricks develop into a learning theory that becomes "logical" even though these principles do not fit into the definition of logics. This is not real logical, but they still want to pretend that it is logical. How to do it? They invented a "crooked logic"! As a result, they use "crooked logic" and they know that cooked people, bandits, always do not value logics.

In his five articles, Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin seemed to justify this "crooked logic". From the very beginning, the existence of the Patriotic Association within the Church has been a disaster, and now, due to these 'Chinese characteristics', it has become unavoidable and righteous... If Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin knew that the Patriotic Association was worth giving up, why is he now making efforts to retake what he denied?

In Pope Benedict XVI's Pastoral Letter to the Chinese Church, he clearly stated that the Patriotic Association is not compatible with Church teachings. Thus, Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin's publicly announced to resign from it. Until today, it is not hard to say that this action, inspired at the time of 'Pastoral Letter', is a model of bearing witness to the faith for the Chinese Church. However, why has he now changed his mind?

The Vatican spokesman has already clarified that Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin's "volte-face" was not inspired by the Holy See, and that all the allegations and rumours that the Bishop's change was due to the influence of the Vatican are all false. As a result, Bishop Ma got himself stuck in the mud (got himself cornered).

Although the Vatican has clarified that it had nothing to do with Ma's volte-face, it did not continue to proclaim Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's basic decision of Patriotic Association as not compatible with the doctrine, nor did it do this with respect to Benedict XVI's basic definition of the Patriotic Association. Moreover, there is a strong push for negotiations between the Vatican and China. All this seems to have inevitably misled Bishop Ma "into the wilderness".

Vatican goes into the wilderness

With Bishop Ma's retraction, the Vatican now also faces a difficult situation.

When he met Herod, Jesus said nothing, because he knew that Herod was a fox! Although Jesus ate with sinners, he did not talk to foxes.

Usually, it is thought that "logic" confuses people, not bandits. But foxes are very cunning; they know that God is merciful and has pity on bandits. Therefore, they hold in their hand the card of the Patriotic Association and negotiate following a "crooked logic".

If the Vatican saves the bandits and signs an agreement, it will bring shame onto itself. If the Vatican does not sign the agreement, it will have to see the faithful struggle with the "crooked logic" and starve to receive some care. If all these efforts do not result in any progress, this will bring more embarrassment. So now, the Vatican's situation is the same as Bishop Ma's, who wrote "the baby is suffering" on his blog.

"People who lived in the shadow of death saw a ray of light," that was the light of survivors who went through the valley of death; it is the light of truth, that is the light witnessed by John Baptist in the wilderness. It is the light that encouraged the bishop to declare publicly his resignation.

Today, facing Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin's volte-face, we cannot help but ask ourselves from the bottom of the heart: is this happening because the light is hidden? Or is it because the light is, in its own way, engulfing the dark?

Christian Times: China releases pastor who protested removal of crosses from church buildings

By Suzette Gutierrez Cachila, Christian Times

China Aid (12.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1sWPKvu> - A pastor who protested against the Chinese government's cross demolition campaign was released Monday, May 9.

Zhang Chongzhu, who pastored the Pyongyang Three-Self Patriotic Movement Church in Zhejiang, had been detained since August 2015. He made a lot of noise last year when the government notified Zhejiang churches that the crosses on their buildings would be removed.

He sent word outside China about the government's new campaign and invited them to "stand in a circle and watch" as the crosses are demolished in the Chinese province.

Speaking at a radio station interview, Zhang Chongzhu said the noise he made was the only solution he could think of in order to find support from outside China and cause the authorities to check their actions.

However, his bold opposition to the cross demolition campaign led to his arrest in August. On Sept. 9, he was put under residential surveillance. In China, residential surveillance is carried out in two ways: in the suspect's home, or in a place designated by the authorities. The latter is usually imposed if doing the surveillance at the suspect's home "may impede the investigation," according to China Change.

In March, Zhang Chongzhu's wife spoke at a radio station and said that her husband had been formally arrested March 9 on charges of "stealing, spying, buying or illegally providing state secrets for institutions and people outside the country."

Before he was arrested, Zhang Chongzhu was set to meet with David Saperstein, the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom. He was to meet Saperstein together with human rights lawyer Zhang Kai, who represented churches suffering persecution from the cross demolition campaign.

Local church members believe the scheduled dialogue with the U.S. ambassador could have been the real reason for Zhang Chongzhu's arrest, according to organization China Aid, which advocates for religious freedom in the country.

Interview with Pastor Li Guozhi at Nanming District Detention Center, Guiyang

By Li Guozhi

Interviewers: Attorney Zhao Yonglin & Attorney Chen Jiangan

Recorder: Attorney Chen Jiangan

China Aid (11.05.2016) – This material was communicated to Human Rights Without Frontiers by Bob Fu, director of ChinaAid after his conference at the European Parliament in Brussels on 25th May.

Q: At our last meeting, you mentioned that the prosecutor came here to meet with you twice. Please tell us more about these meetings.

A: OK. The two meetings happened on March 16 and April 15. Three people came to the first meeting, including Zhao Yuanpeng and a person surnamed Ke from the Anti-Malfesance and Infringement Department of Nanming District Procuratorate. The third person was here to videotape the meeting. Only Zhao Yuanpeng wore a uniform.

Q: What did they do to you at your first meeting?

A: They interrogated me in a room with no furniture separating us and secured me on a metal chair. They could all come up to me. Prosecutor Ke brought up a chair to sit next to me. At the beginning, Prosecutor Ke said to me, "You'd better confess, your life is in my hands. I'm here to meet with you because I see you as an ally. If you refuse to cooperate, I'll treat you as a spy, as someone on the opposing side. In that case, we won't treat you this nicely. I can make you disappear from the face of the Earth. I'm a powerful man. Any cop here won't be standing if I ask him to get on his knees. (If you refuse to cooperate,) not only you alone, also your wife and your children, will all have trouble. I'm an expert on torture. I know how to beat you up without leaving a mark on your body for people to see or doctors to diagnose. They won't even know what causes your death.

Q: What else did they say? Did they force you to make up a confession or beat you up?

A: The first time, they produced a written record and had me sign it. They threatened me first and asked me to cooperate. They took me out of the room, but then had me come back and they turned on their camcorder to record the interview. When the machine was rolling, they refrained from saying any threatening words.

Q: Could you tell us about the interrogation on April 15?

A: Five people showed up for this meeting, still in a room with no furniture between them and me. The five people are Prosecutor He, Prosecutor Zhang Wei, a prosecutor with the surname Han, a person to videotape the interrogation, and another person whose name I don't know. Ke brought up a chair to sit next to me and said, "It's not my, but my friends' job to interrogate you today. I'm here to keep an eye on you. When we start videotaping, you'd better cooperate and not play the trick of silence."

Then he asked Zhang Wei to interview me, just to rehearse without videotaping.

Zhang Wei asked me what happened on Dec. 6, 2015. I was silent, which made Prosecutor Ke mad. He came over and stomped my feet. It hurt very badly.

Prosecutor Ke said, "No use staring at us. No one here sympathizes with you. Do you know why the pigs on the pig farm behind this building are so fat? (The detention center's pig farm is right across from the interrogation room. Pigsties are right outside the hallway with many fat pigs in it.) We can turn you into food for the pigs, which is a way to die. There's another way to die. I can take you to an isolated, open space and no one will find out how you died. We can make you experience something worse than death and then make you disappear from the face of the Earth. Or I can make arrangements with the detention center to have three or four guys locked up in here rape you and torture you every night. Suing me won't work. I'm the boss here."

Then he lifted my chin up and made me look him in his eyes. He stomped my feet really hard and said, "Not just you, your wife and two sons will be in trouble as well." Then he yelled profanities at me and said, "I can kill you today!"

Q: Did he stomp your feet all the time? In the presence of the other four people?

A: He did. He stomped my feet really hard, with four other people present in the room. The person in charge of videotaping was in another room. After cussing me out, Ke left. Zhang Wei and Prosecutor Han told me to cooperate. Then they took me out of the room, brought me back, and started videotaping from 10:10am to 14:45pm. At last, they made me sign the written record.

Q: Is what you told us all true? If it is, please read this record and sign it.

A: All I just told you is true. I certify that this record is based on what I said.

Two dead, two imprisoned as authorities persecute house church members

ChinaAid (10.04.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1MrfgBI> - A Christian woman disclosed the abuses she and her family members suffered in 2014 for their participation in a serially targeted house church in Beijing.

Authorities sentenced Wang Chunyan to a month in criminal detention for "illegally gathering." During her incarceration, her brother, who suffered from a mental illness, died from a lack of care, leaving behind a young daughter.

On Oct. 21, 2014, Wang applied to the Tongzhou Sub-bureau of the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau for approximately 1,403,000 Yuan (U.S. \$217,000.00) in compensation for her detention. The Compensation Committee of the Beijing Municipal Second Intermediate People's Court denied her request on Dec. 1, 2014, stating, "Wang Chunyan herself admitted to participating in a house church" and that "because Wang Chunyan was suspected of committing a crime, she was therefore criminally detained according to the law."

Similarly, officials injured and sentenced her sister to one year in prison for involvement in Holy Love Fellowship. According to Wang, her mother also died as a result of government persecution.

China Aid exposes abuses, such as those experienced by the Wang family, in order to promote religious freedom and rule of law in China.

Authorities place new restrictions on released pastor's freedom

ChinaAid (07.04.2016) - <http://bit.ly/22roUpB> - Officials in China's coastal Zhejiang province imposed a series of restrictions on the recently released pastor of the largest government-sanctioned church, forbidding unapproved travel and unauthorized contact with the outside world.

Gu "Joseph" Yuese, the senior pastor of Chongyi Church in Hangzhou and former chairman of the Zhejiang Provincial China Christian Council (CCC) publicly voiced his opposition to an outbreak of state-organized cross demolitions currently sweeping across Zhejiang. As a result, authorities published a letter to churches in Hangzhou calling for Gu's removal and replaced him with a different government-approved minister. On Jan. 27, officials alleged that Gu had embezzled funds and held him in administrative

detention issuing a formal arrest on Feb. 6. On March 31, he was released on bail and allowed to return home the next day.

However, according to a local Christian, "Now, even though he is at home, he has received certain restrictions on his actions. He cannot go anywhere as he wishes. His communications with people, [such as] social contacts and meetings [with people], have all received restrictions. If he wants to go to a place or do something, he cannot do it until he obtains the public security department's approval."

Additionally, officials prohibited Gu from traveling without approval and giving interviews.

Gu's release occurred just before Chinese President Xi Jinping was scheduled to meet with Obama on the fringes of the Nuclear Security Summit, stirring suspicions that he was freed in order to minimize conversations on human rights.

China Aid president Bob Fu recognized Gu's release as "a small step in the right direction." However, he continued, saying that "...the scope and depth of suppression are both still ... [more] severe than before. Specifically, in the process of forcibly demolishing crosses, violence has been used against innocent [Christian] believers. China should not violate Article 36 of the [Chinese] Constitution, which concerns safeguarding the religious freedoms promised to citizens as well as a commitment to [protect] human rights. All of the people currently apprehended should be released. We are very worried."

China Aid reports cases such as Gu "Joseph" Yuese's in order to expose abuses and promote religious freedom and rule of law in China.

Pastors, church members detained in church raid

ChinaAid (04.04.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1qNa4hK> - A house church gathering in Changji, a city in China's far western Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, was raided on March 9 by authorities, who criminally detained two church members, the latest in a long string of house church raids throughout the region.

Nearly 40 people attended the meeting, a Bible training session, including pastors and visitors from other provinces. According to a church member who spoke with China Aid's reporter on March 29, dozens of police and officers from the local religious affairs bureau raided the meeting, claiming that the proceedings were illegal religious activities and taking the attendees' ID cards. Authorities took some of the attendees to the police station for interrogation, which lasted several hours, and did not release them until later that night.

Two of the attendees were criminally detained: a deacon named Wang Lu and an unnamed woman who helped transport people to the meeting. Public security officials did not give any notice or explanation regarding the detentions.

China Aid reports on religious freedom abuses, such as the detentions and house church raids in Xinjiang, in order to expose these events and promote human rights and rule of law in China.

Uyghur imam, farmers sentenced for illegally practicing religion in China's Xinjiang

World Uyghur Congress (17.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1T3YpWD> - An imam and eight farmers from a village in Aksu (in Chinese, Akesu) prefecture are serving prison sentences from seven to nine years for practicing their religion during China's "strike hard" campaign to crack down on ethnic Uyghurs in the country's restive northwestern Xinjiang region, according to local residents and officials.

The imam, Eziz Emet, 47, who was arrested in May 2015, received a nine-year sentence last September for teaching religion illegally in the prefecture's Peyshenbebazar village, while the farmers each received a seven-year sentence for praying together in places that authorities had not designated for Muslim worship, according to information recently obtained by RFA's Uyghur Service.

Among the farmers were Turdi Mamut, 57, Turdi Abla, 35, Tursun Mamut, 61, Ismail Awut, 62, Ablikim Tursun, 17, Exet Awut, 25, Abla Awut, 59, and Memet Setirash, 42, all of whom authorities arrested in September of 2014 and sentenced last February, said Mamut Awut, security chairman of Peyshenbebazar village.

Although the sentencings occurred six to 13 months ago, a letter from a village resident sent recently to RFA said the imam and the farmers had now joined the ranks of political prisoners who number one per every three families in Peyshenbebazar—an unusually high figure for a village where about 300 families comprise a population of 1,500 people.

"I know that eight farmers were sentenced for seven years for praying together," Awut said. "We warned them not to say Friday prayers separately, not following the designated imam, but they had prayed on Fridays together in different places four times in six months."

The farmers also had organized religious gatherings at other people's homes, he said.

'Strike hard' begins

After a deadly suicide bombing in May 2014 in Xinjiang's regional capital Urumqi, Chinese authorities, who blamed the attack on Uyghur separatists, rolled out the strike hard campaign to crack down on members of the Turkic-speaking, Muslim minority group.

The campaign included police raids on Uyghur households, restrictions on Islamic practices, and curbs on the culture and language of the Uyghur people, including videos and other material.

It was during this time that authorities in Aykol township deemed the Peyshenbebazar village farmers' private prayer sessions at places they had not officially designated for worship as a sign of religious extremism, Awut said.

As a result, the men were arrested and indicted on religion extremism charges, he said.

"They were all obedient people, ... but because they prayed separately instead of following the government-designated imam, they were wrong," Awut said. "It was a clear expression of dissatisfaction with the government."

Awut, who helped local police conduct the search and arrest operations, said he "never imagined that they would be sentenced for years."

Because most of the farmers have three or four young children, their wives have had to take on work as hired hands to support their families while their husbands are in prison, he said.

When RFA contacted the Aykol township police station, an officer who declined to give his name said he did not know exactly how many people from the village were behind bars.

But he confirmed that the number of political prisoners in the village was higher than it was in other places, because of a protest by Uyghurs on Aug. 8, 2013, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, when authorities fired on a crowd, killing at least three people and injuring 50 others.

After the violent incident, Aykol township became a major focus of a crackdown by Chinese authorities, who rolled out the strike hard campaign the following year to stamp out acts of terrorism or Islamic extremism in Xinjiang.

Since then, local police have carried out more investigations and arrests of Uyghurs in Peyshebebazar, according to officials and residents.

Closed-door trials

The trials during which the farmers were sentenced were not open to public, although some family members were allowed to attend, said prisoner Turdi Mamut's 52-year-old wife Ayshigul, who was present at the sentencings.

"I did not hear anything that indicated that these eight people committed any crimes, but only prayed together outside the government-designated mosque," she said.

"I was baffled," she said. "There were no religiously educated people who could interpret the Quran among them. Their knowledge of Islam is merely sufficient for them to fulfill the required prayers five times a day."

She added that she did not know why the farmers were considered a national security threat, because they were not involved in any other religious activities.

"The whole neighborhood was shocked" by their arrest, she said.

Mamut Awut also said he assisted with the arrest of imam Eziz Emet when a local police officer who only gave his first name Gheyret came to the village at the end of last April to apprehend him.

When Emet, who is a government-designated imam, insisted that he had not committed any crime, Awut told him that he need not be afraid if he hadn't done anything wrong and could clear up any misunderstandings.

Afterwards, when neither Awut nor Emet's family received any information about him from police, some recently released prisoners informed them that Emet had been sentenced to nine years for illegally teaching religion to students, he said.

Although Emet had taught some teenagers how to read the Quran and some Quranic verses for praying, he had not imparted anything concerning extremist beliefs or ideology that went against the government's policies, Awut said.

"I do not know why the government was suspicious about him," Awut said, adding that teaching a few teenagers how to read the Quran is deemed normal practice.

"He did it during the strike hard campaign—that is why," he said.

Pastor under house arrest publishes prayer for detained human rights lawyer

ChinaAid.org (07.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1o19MS7> - The lead pastor of Shouwang Church in Beijing, who is currently under house arrest, released a letter of prayer on March 1 for Zhang Kai, a prominent human rights lawyer currently under criminal detention.

Pastor Jin Tianming has been supervised by three shifts of police, 24 hours a day, for the last four years, after his church as long been persecuted by authorities. Despite his lack of personal freedom, Jin has remained active in Christian groups both in China and abroad. His letter urges Christians to pray that "the Lord [brings Zhang Kai] back to his family and back among us." The full translation can be found below.

Zhang, who was taken into police custody in August 2015, was officially criminally detained on Feb. 26, following a six-month period under "residential surveillance in a designated location," the Chinese government's official name for a "black jail." Zhang is charged with "endangering state security" and "gathering a crowd to disturb public order" after he represented the cases of more than 100 churches in Wenzhou facing demolition of their crosses.

China Aid reports on the situations of dissidents such as Jin and Zhang in order to promote religious freedom and rule of law throughout China. Those wishing to get involved can join the Free Zhang Kai campaign to help raise awareness of his plight.

Pastor, wife and son sentenced to 14, 12 and 3 years in prison

HRWF (29.02.2016) - On 25 February, Bao Guohua, senior pastor of Jinhua Christian Church, Xing Wenxiang and their son, Bao Chenxing were sentenced to 14, 12 and 3 years in prison. Nine other Christians received sentences of varying lengths.

Bao Guohua was initially detained on 26 July 2015, along with his wife and their son, after they spoke out against forced cross removals occurring across the province. Later, authorities forced them to dismiss their lawyers, and Xing penned letters to family and friends begging them to hire legal aid for her husband on 20 October 2016.

Bao Guohua, the former leader of Jinhua Christian church, and his wife Xing Wenxiang, along with other essential church staff—of a total of 12 people—were found guilty in the trial of first instance by the Wucheng District Court of Jinhua. Bao Guohua and his wife Xing Wenxiang were found guilty of embezzlement; gathering a crowd to disturb public order; illegal business operations; and concealing accounting documents, accounting books, or financial statements—a total of four crimes. Bao Guohua was sentenced to 14 years in prison, the confiscation of assets totaling 600,000 Yuan [(U.S. \$91,850)], and order to pay a fine of 100,000 Yuan [(U.S. \$15,300)]. Xing Wenxiang was sentenced to 12 years in prison, the confiscation of assets totaling 600,000 Yuan, and ordered to pay a fine of 90,000 Yuan [(U.S. \$13,770)]. The rest received various sentences.

Tibetan Monk jailed for two years over Dalai Lama photo

Radio Free Asia (22.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1oZwQly> - A court in northwestern China's Qinghai province has handed a two-year jail term to a Tibetan monk accused of passing a photo of exiled spiritual leader the Dalai Lama to friends via social media, sources in the region and in exile said.

Gomar Choephel, 47, was sentenced on Feb. 17 by the People's Intermediate Court in the Malho (in Chinese, Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, a local source told RFA's Tibetan Service.

"He had already been detained for several months, and has now been sentenced for circulating a photo of the Dalai Lama through social media, and also for having the photo in his personal possession," RFA's source said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"He was convicted of undermining social stability and of taking actions aimed at splitting the country," the source said.

Choephel, a monk of the Rongwo monastery in Malho's Rebgong (Tongren) county, is currently being held in the county's Drakmar detention center, the source added.

Initially detained on July 10, 2015, Choephel had been held without trial for about seven months and "was only recently sentenced," the source said.

Speaking separately, a Tibetan living in exile in India confirmed that Choephel had first been taken into custody last year, citing contacts of his own in Rebgong.

"Gomar Choephel was detained last year for sending the Dalai Lama's photo through his phone onto social media and for keeping the photo in his possession," the source, named Tenzin, told RFA.

If the seven months already spent in detention are counted toward his sentence, Choephel will have to serve a year and four months before he is released, sources told RFA's Tibetan and Mandarin Services.

The 80-year-old Dalai Lama, whose photos are banned by Chinese authorities in Tibetan areas, fled Tibet into exile in India in 1959 and is reviled by Chinese leaders as a dangerous separatist who seeks to split the formerly self-governing region from Beijing's rule.

In what he calls a Middle Way Approach, though, the Dalai Lama himself says that he seeks only a "meaningful autonomy" for Tibet as a part of China, with protections for the region's language, religion, and culture.

Why does China have women-only mosques?

The Islamic world is wide and various, its points of view almost as numerous as its people. And Islam in China, with its long tradition of women-only mosques, provides a good illustration, says Michael Wood.

BBC (23.02.2016) - <http://bbc.in/1SRjELQ> - In the middle of the plain of the Yellow River in Henan province is the city of Kaifeng. The old capital of the Song Dynasty, 1,000 years ago, it was one of the greatest cities anywhere in the world before the 19th Century - and a meeting place of peoples and faiths.

In the narrow alleys of the old town are Buddhist and Daoist temples, a shrine to the Goddess of Mercy, always teeming with people. There are Christian churches, and Muslim mosques - both religions came in the 7th Century (China has some of the oldest Muslim communities outside the Near East).

There is even the last remnant of China's Jewish community, which came from Persia and perhaps Yemen too, in the Song Dynasty.

Most fascinating though, are the women-only mosques, and even more surprising is that they have female prayer leaders - women imams.

The main women's mosque is close to the central men's mosque, across an alley lined with food stalls with steaming tureens and white-capped bakers making the local spiced bread.

The prayer leader here is Guo Jingfang, who was trained by her father, an imam at the men's mosque.

She took me through Kaifeng's winding alleys, stopping on the way to hold animated chats with neighbours and to pick up an order from the local cake maker, until finally we came to the ornamental gate of what looked like a little Confucian temple. Inside was a tiny flagged courtyard with a tiled roof festooned with vines and yellow flowers.

This is Wangjia Alley mosque, said to be the oldest surviving women's mosque in Kaifeng, built in 1820. The prayer hall is scarcely more than a spacious living room covered with carpets and chairs. It could hardly fit more than 50 people but it is one of the loveliest places of worship I have seen anywhere.

Outside, in dappled sunlight, we met members of the community and their prayer leader. Once a factory worker, she came from a religious family and after five years of study had become an ahong - a woman prayer leader - though she sees her main job simply as teaching women to read the Koran.

We stood in the courtyard and chatted away. Guo Jingfang saw women's mosques as a Chinese tradition but especially strong in Henan - there are 16 in Kaifeng and dozens more in the countryside around, along with small teaching schools in the big city, Zhengzhou, and in some smaller towns. Further afield, there are many more down south in Yunnan and in the north, but not in Muslim Xinjiang, where they follow a more traditional Central Asian brand of Sunni Islam.

As for how the tradition of women's mosques started, we have to go back to the founding of the Ming Dynasty in the late 1300s, when the Muslim community - previously favoured guests - suddenly became an anxious and oppressed minority. Responding to the shock of the alien Mongol occupation, the early Ming rulers waged a chauvinistic war against non-Han peoples. Minorities now aroused hostility and suspicion and were subject to a brutal policy of assimilation - the Muslims were told they must marry Han people and not among themselves.

So the 15th Century was almost catastrophic for Chinese Islam. But in the late 16th Century things improved and among the Muslims a new cultural movement began, a revival of Islamic culture and education.

A century later Chinese Muslim philosophers were able to write erudite books showing how you could be a loyal Muslim and also loyal to the Chinese state. And at this point, at the grassroots, men realised how important women could be in preserving and transmitting the faith.

So women's mosques grew out of a double movement in the Chinese Muslim world - the need to preserve the community, and the desire for women's education.

Guo Jingfang and her friends in Kaifeng think that the schools came first, and then became full mosques in the 18th Century. Education still has a big role today, from basic teaching to copying texts.

"When our mothers were girls it was the only place where poor Muslim women could receive an education: the women did it together, women supporting women," said one of the women chatting in the mosque's courtyard.

"In some places in the Muslim world it is not allowed, but here we think it a good thing. Women have had a better status here since 1949 and this is part of it."

One of the women mentioned the progressive ideas of the Islamic Association of Kaifeng, which gets men and women to work together on new education projects.

"China is changing and these are good things for the future," she said.

Later, in the main women's mosque, everyone joined in the prayers, and the men in our crew were invited too, visitors from afar.

There were 30 or so women, young and old, in coloured and embroidered headscarves, lime-green, scarlet, black spangled with silver stars. After a period of calm reflection, Guo Jingfang lifted her hands and began singing. Then facing the congregation she started the prayers. It was beautiful and simple, the sounds of the street receding so you could almost hear a pin drop. I felt privileged to be there.

Afterwards, everyone crowded round. Half our crew were women - director Rebecca, translator Qian, and assistant producer Tina Sijiao - and Guo Jingfang and her friends were as fascinated about their lives as we were about theirs. We ended with laughter and selfies - jolly pictures of pious, thoughtful, joyful women, comfortable in their skins and strong in their solidarity for women.

The Muslim community has had its ups and downs in China. Today, as in the Ming Dynasty, they are anxious to demonstrate their loyalty, as rumours come of dissent in the far west in Xinjiang - keen to point out that the old Muslims, the Hui, are loyal Chinese, just as the Han are.

But what began as a response to the patriarchy of traditional Chinese society, and to the historical situation of Islam under the Ming and the Manchus, has now also become a feminist issue.

China was isolated for much of the 20th Century, so these women-only mosques were untouched by the waves of radical Islam which came after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Now the wheel is turning again and what is seen as completely normal here in Kaifeng is being taken up in other parts of the world. Iran accepted women's mosques not so long ago. There are women's mosques in Berlin and Amsterdam, in Lebanon and Bukhara and even in Sudan. An African-American woman recently led prayers in the USA's first-ever women's mosque in Los Angeles. In the UK, the Bradford Muslim Women's Council only recently announced a plan to build the UK's first women's mosque.

To many Muslims I have spoken to, men and women, the movement is an inevitable necessary and renewing phase in the history of Islam... And if the goal is the renewal of spiritual life then the gorgeous little mosque in Wangjia Alley carries a lesson for us all.

Travelling writing and filming for the last 35 years between the Mediterranean and the Yellow Sea, I have often had occasion to reflect on how frequently the Muslim world is misunderstood, in its beliefs, but also in its customs and practices.

It's amazing isn't it how often an expert claims to talk about Islam as if it were monolithic? Sometimes you might even think the Wahhabis spoke for the majority, when actually they are a minority in a vast sea of faith with myriad points of view.

Think of the beautiful shrines of the Punjab with their haunting qawwali music. Or the other side of the coin, the old moulids - the exuberant saints' fairs of Egypt with their all-night dancing, ferris wheels and medicine shows... the spiritual and the worldly side by side, taking energy from each other.

On my travels over the years - to the Sufis in Konya (Turkey) or Sind (Pakistan), shrines like Nizamuddin in Delhi, Chishti in Ajmer (Rajasthan), or Ibn al-Arabi in Damascus, the timeless calm of Al-Azhar (Cairo), the passion of Karbala (Iraq) - I have always been struck by how full of rich difference the world of Islam is. And among those unforgettable experiences the women's mosques in Kaifeng will have a very special place.

It may not be the kind of place you would expect to stumble upon a mosque, but Muslims have lived among the forests and lakes of Lithuania for more than 600 years - showing that tolerance reigned here in the Middle Ages, even when religious strife was rampant in other parts of Europe.

China pastor Gu Yuese investigated for corruption

A prominent pastor in China, Gu Yuese, is being investigated for corruption, according to local church authorities in Zhejiang province.

BBC (01.02.2016) - <http://bbc.in/1Kld4KG> - Mr Gu, the head of one of China's biggest state-sanctioned churches, is accused of embezzling funds.

A group of Hong Kong-based Christians have since alleged his probe is linked to his open opposition to a government crackdown on Christian activity.

China is officially atheist but says it guarantees religious freedom.

However, all churches have to be approved by the state and authorities keep a close eye on their activities to contain their influence.

'Political revenge'

Mr Gu is the pastor of the Chongyi Church in Zhejiang, which has thousands of followers. The church could not immediately be reached for comment.

The local chapters of state-backed church authorities China Christian Council and Three-Self Patriotic Movement posted similarly-worded statements on their websites on Friday about Mr Gu's arrest.

They said they had learned in "recent days" that Mr Gu was "being investigated because of suspicions of economic issues, including embezzling money", adding that the matter had "to do with one individual's behaviour".

However, Bob Fu, of the US-based Christian human rights group China Aid, told the BBC that the charges were "political revenge" for Mr Gu's "disloyalty to the Chinese

Communist Party's religious policy" by opposing the government's forced demolition of crosses on churches.

"In the past two weeks 18 crosses were removed and destroyed... Overall at least 1,800 crosses of churches were demolished since the campaign started," he said.

Zhejiang, a province located in the south east of China, is home to many churches, particularly in the city of Wenzhou.

The city saw a crackdown on displays of crosses in 2014, and again last year - a policy Mr Gu had openly opposed.

A group of about 40 Christians in Hong Kong, some of whom are church leaders, also alleged in an open letter to the media that Mr Gu's arrest was connected to his opposition to government efforts to contain churches in the province.

They said that after local churches objected to the tearing down of crosses last July, authorities began investigating Chongyi Church "in order to cook up charges and suppress suspected dissidents".

In August last year pastor Bao Guohua, his wife and several church employees were detained in Zhejiang, and accused of embezzlement as well as disrupting social order.

Their church's lawyer told the BBC at the time they were being punished for protesting against the removal of their church cross.

Authorities have justified the tearing down of crosses, and in some cases the demolition of church buildings, by saying they were illegally constructed and broke planning rules.

But rights groups say such actions are an effort to rein in their power and run contrary to the guarantee of religious freedom in China's constitution.

Pastor of Zhejiang's largest government-sanctioned church placed in black jail

China Aid (28.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1nMc4p1> - Ten days after officials in China's coastal Zhejiang province released a notice detailing the forced removal of a pastor from his position at China's largest government-sanctioned church, the pastor was taken into custody today and placed under "residential surveillance in a designated location." Additionally, family members believe that the pastor's wife, whom they have been unable to contact, was also taken into police custody.

China Aid reported that Pastor Gu "Joseph" Yuese of Hangzhou's Chongyi Church, a Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) Church, was forcibly removed from his position leading the church according to a Jan. 18 document released by the local TSPM and China Christian Council (CCC) because of his public opposition to the hundreds of forced cross demolitions throughout Zhejiang since early 2014.

China Aid learned of Gu's arrest after his family members and staff at Chongyi Church were unable to contact him yesterday. Today, they received an official notice, stating that Gu was placed under "residential surveillance in a designated location," a situation commonly known by experts as a black jail. A formal arrest notice is expected to follow.

Family members also told China Aid that they believe Gu's wife, Zhou Lianmei, was

detained after the couple's home was searched by the Hangzhou Public Security Bureau.

Gu currently serves as a member of the standing committee of the nation's CCC and is the current chairman of the Zhejiang Provincial CCC. He has served as the senior pastor of Chongyi Church for more than a decade.

"His arrest marks a major escalation in the crackdown against those who oppose the forced demolition of crosses," China Aid Founder and President Bob Fu said. "He will be the highest-ranking national church leader arrested since the Cultural Revolution."

China Aid will continue to update the story of Gu's situation as more information becomes available.

Additionally, China Aid learned that six church crosses were forcibly demolished within the past week.

China Aid exposes religious freedom abuses, such as those experienced by Gu Yue-se and Zhou Lianmei, in order to promote religious freedom and rule of law in China.

Guizhou officials formally arrest house church pastor

China Aid (22.01.2016) - After serving two administrative detention and one criminal detention sentences, the pastor of a house church in China's southern Guizhou province was arrested on suspicion of "divulging state secrets" today, shortly after officials rejected his colleague's administrative reconsideration application on Jan. 11.

Li Guozhi, also known by his alias, Yang Hua, was last seen donning a black hood as officials herded him into an unidentified vehicle. As a pastor of Huoshi Church, which the government has been serially targeting, he was detained twice consecutively for a total of 10 days.

According to previous notices delivered to family members, Li originally served time in administrative detention for "the crime of obstructing justice" and "gathering a crowd to disturb social order." On the day he was scheduled to be released from his second administrative detention in late December, authorities added the charge of "illegally holding state secrets" and transferred him to criminal detention.

Following another accusation that Huoshi Church had been using its venue to hold religious activities while it was not authorized to do so, officials imposed a fine that began on Nov. 22, even though the church consistently reported all religious events to the government. The original notice, delivered on Nov. 18, informed the church that they had three days to comply with legal stipulations, otherwise, a fine of 10 Yuan [U.S. \$2.00] per day for every square meter of church property would be imposed.

After the church refused, the Guiyang Municipal Urban Management Administrative Law Enforcement issued an administrative penalty notice to church members Su Tianfu, Zhang Xiuhong, and Liang Xuewu, under whose names the venue is officially registered, stating that the church had 15 days to pay the fine. If they failed to do this, an additional 3 percent per day charge would be added to the overall expense, totaling 110,296 Yuan [U.S. \$16,768.00].

Su, who is a pastor at Huoshi Church, informed a China Aid reporter that he had applied for an administrative reconsideration: "... otherwise, we don't have the money to pay the fine."

On Jan. 11, the Guiyang Municipal People's Government rejected his application.

Beijing church elder formally arrested after six months in detention



Tianjin Municipal Public Security Bureau Arrest Notice

Hu Shuigen: After undergoing the Tianjin Municipal People's Procuratorate's approval, our bureau carried out the arrest of Hu Shigen, who is suspected of subversion of state power, on Jan. 8, 2016 at 6:00 p.m. He is currently detained at Tianjin Municipal Detention Center Number 1. Jan. 9, 2016

China Aid (14.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1n9xCep> - China Aid learned today that authorities in China's northern Tianjin Municipality formally arrested a Beijing church elder and democracy activist for "subversion of state power" on Jan. 8, according to an arrest notice received by the man's family members.

Hu Shigen, an elder of Yahebo Church in Beijing and long-time democracy activist, was detained on July 10 in connection with the nation-wide [crackdown](#) on legal professionals. Hu Shigen has faced trouble with the government for his pro-democracy actions for more than 20 years, during which time he served 16 years of a 20-year prison sentence. Hu Shigen's brother, Hu Shuigen, supplied China Aid with a photo of Hu Shigen's arrest notice (shown above).

News of Hu Shigen's arrest comes only a day after news of the formal arrest of [Wang Yu](#) and her husband Bao Longjun, both prominent human rights lawyers. International media also reported that human rights lawyers Zhou Shifeng, Wang Quanzhang, Xie Yang and Xie Yanyi were [formally charged](#) recently. Authorities initially detained all six lawyers during the July crackdown.

China Aid reports on cases like Hu Shigen's and others like him in order to expose the Chinese government's abuses against its citizens and promote rule of law in China.
