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Police crackdown on Chinese Uyghurs in Egypt and 'repatriation' on Beijing's 'request'

Human Rights Without Frontiers denounces the forceful 'repatriation' by Egypt of Uyghur religious students back to China

HRWF (18.08.2017) - In early July, Egyptian police rounded up, detained and deported at least 200 Uyghurs, mainly religious students, in Cairo, arresting some in restaurants or at their homes and seizing others at airports as they tried to flee the country.

On 7th July, Radio Free Asia reported:

Students who have evaded detention are hiding in malls, in mosques, and in nearby fields, one Uyghur mother said, adding that she is now on the run with two young students given to her by their mother for protection.

"When we were leaving, I spotted some people watching the area where we were staying. They were in a black, ugly-looking car with tinted windows, and after we left they detained the Uyghur students who were living at our house."

"They were all Uyghurs, and I'm sure they were sent by the Chinese government," she added.

One Uyghur student now in hiding said that his brother, a PhD student at Al-Azhar, had also been detained.

"I am now on the run with his wife and three children," he said. "My brother called me from the detention center and said that he saw about 200 Uyghur students being held there."

"It has been several days now that we have been running on empty stomachs," another student said.

"We have valid visas and passports, but we can't go to the airports, and we can't go to the markets for food or get gas for our cars. The Egyptian people have been told that we're criminals, and they inform the police if they see us."

Another student said that a friend in detention had told him that police were forcing them to sign documents stating they had participated in Uyghur separatist organizations based outside of China.

"Some did not sign the document, because older students warned them not to," he said.

"Police took fingerprints of all their fingers."

Also speaking to RFA, an Uzbek national living in Egypt said that he and his family were dining at one of Cairo's Uyghur restaurants when police suddenly arrived.

"There were 10 to 20 Uyghurs there, chefs and so on, and the police took all of them away."

"There were Kyrgyz and Uzbek people at the restaurant, too, but they weren't

touched at all. Police asked everyone's ethnicity and took away all the people who said they were Uyghur."

Reached for comment, a staff member at the Egyptian embassy in Washington D.C. said only that she had heard media reports of the detentions. "Since I am not authorized to speak on this matter, I cannot say anything more about it," she added.

Calls to the embassy's press office rang unanswered on Friday.

Rebiya Kadeer, president of the Munich-based exile World Uyghur Congress, meanwhile called on the international community to prevent the forced return of Uyghurs from Egypt to China, adding, "We have been following this issue closely for the past two or three months."

"I ask all Uyghur organizations to do their best to help the Uyghurs detained in Egypt."

International law requires that people living in foreign countries not be returned to situations in which they are likely to face persecution, Sophie Richardson—China director for Human Rights Watch—said in an interview.

"It's extremely concerning if the Egyptian government is somehow being complicit in a legally baseless Chinese effort to force people back to China," Richardson said.

As a signatory to the United Nations' Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and according to international law, Egypt cannot deport the students to China because of the threats they face at home.

In a letter, a group of Uyghur students living in Cairo appealed to Dr. Ahmed El-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, to intervene to block further deportations to China.

"Our only sin is that we want to learn and study religion," said the letter, a copy of which was obtained by the Arabic-language news outlet HuffPost Arabi.

"Egypt, where Al-Azhar is built, [should be] a safe haven for those who want to learn," the letter said.

In a July 7 statement issued after a meeting the day before with a Xinjiang delegation arranged by China's ambassador to Egypt, Al-Azhar said that no Uyghur students had been arrested "inside Al-Azhar campus or from any buildings associated with Al-Azhar."

"The institution is following up with authorities in the wake of reports on social media," Al-Azhar said.

Chinese authorities also detain Uyghur Muslims coming back from overseas pilgrimages

In July, Chinese authorities in the northwestern region of Xinjiang held hundreds of ethnic minority Uyghur Muslims after they returned from overseas pilgrimage. They are charging them with illegal pilgrimage, and for taking part in illegal religious activities.

Article 21 of the "26 Forms of Illegal Religious Activity" leaked to Radio Free Asia in February 2017 forbids anyone from traveling overseas on pilgrimage, including the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, with companies not endorsed by China's religious affairs authorities.

In March, a rights lawyer went to lodge appeal proceedings, and came across a detention center—the Changji Detention Center—where there were 200-300 Uyghurs who were being held after coming back from pilgrimage in the Middle East. They were all being held for investigation and screening.

According to Dilxat Raxit, spokesman for the exile World Uyghur Congress group, Uyghurs who have studied in the Middle East are also being detained on their return. Some of them are also facing charges of religious extremism or terrorism.

None of those held for religious activities will likely be able to find employment once they have a criminal record.

Tibetan monk freed after two-year prison term



Gomar Choepel in an undated photo. Photo courtesy of an RFA listener

A Tibetan monk jailed for two years in western China's Qinghai province for "subverting the state" has been released with restrictions placed on his movements, according to Tibetan sources.

Gomar Choepel, 48, was freed from the Ho Min Xian prison in Qinghai's Menyuan Hui Autonomous County on or around July 10, and returned to Rongwo monastery in Rebgong (in Chinese, Tongren) county in Qinghai's Malho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, said a source inside Tibet, who spoke to RFA's Tibetan Service on condition of anonymity.

"Chinese authorities warned the monks and relatives in advance not to organize any kind of reception to mark his release," the source said.

“Rongwo monks and his relatives did go to receive him, but they were not allowed to put up any significant reception, including taking photos related to his release and arrival and so on,” he added.

“The authorities also imposed restrictions on his movements from the monastery.”

According to the source, Choephel was detained on July 10, 2015 when police in Rebgong raided his room at Rongwo and found a photo of exiled spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, who has lived in India since escaping Tibet during a failed national uprising in 1959.

Beijing rejects the Dalai Lama's call for a "middle way" solution of a semiautonomous Tibet under Chinese rule, and accuses him and his supporters of campaigning to split Tibet from the rest of China.

Choephel was held without being charged until Feb. 17 last year, when the Marlo People's Intermediate Court tried him for circulating a statement that read “no stability without equality,” possession of a photo of the Dalai Lama, and “commission of acts aimed at subverting the state.”

He was sentenced to two years in jail and returned to Ho Min Xian prison, where he worked 15-hour days producing army uniforms and erecting fences, the source said.

A second source, who also asked to remain unnamed, told RFA that Choephel's relatives were only permitted to see him once a month during his incarceration.

“If they spoke in Mandarin [Chinese], they could converse for 30 minutes, but if the conversation was in Tibetan they were only allowed to speak for five minutes,” the source said.

“Gomar Choephel is the son of Lojang and a resident of Gomang village,” he added.

County targeted

In March, sources told RFA that authorities in Rebgong were strengthening security forces amid official concerns that the anniversary of the 1959 national uprising against Beijing's rule might trigger further protests.

The source said that armed police and security officers in civilian clothes could be seen near Rongwo monastery, at major road crossings, and in the front courtyards of government buildings, and emergency personnel stationed in the area had been equipped with fire extinguishers to prevent self-immolation protests by Tibetans.

Earlier that month, monks from Rongwo had appealed for the return of property formerly leased to a teacher's college but seized by local authorities after the college moved to a new location.

The property, comprising one third of the total estate of the monastery, was confiscated in 2016, prompting monks to petition for its return, but Chinese authorities locked and sealed it.

In March 2016, authorities imposed sweeping new restrictions on Rongwo and other Rebgong monasteries, directing them to strictly follow the leadership of their management committees and strengthening a ban on the display of photos of exiled spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, sources in the region and in exile told RFA in earlier reports.

Chinese authorities set up the management committees in early 2012 in most Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, placing them under the direct control of government officials permanently stationed there, sources said.

The policy was enacted to ensure that monks and nuns do not participate in activities calling for an independent Tibet or “disturb the social order” by engaging in self-immolations or other protests, they said.

Reported by Sangye Dorjee and Lhuboom for RFA’s Tibetan Service. Translated by Karma Dorjee. Written in English by Joshua Lipos.

Xinjiang authorities sentence Uyghur scholar to 10 years in prison



Hebibulla Tohti in an undated photo. Photo courtesy of the China Islamic Association

RFA (09.08.2017) - <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/scholar-08092017151559.html> - Authorities in northwest China’s Xinjiang region have sentenced a prominent Uyghur theological scholar sponsored by the country’s state-sanctioned Islamic Association to 10 years in prison following his return from Egypt, according to local sources.

A faculty member at Xinjiang Islamic University in the regional capital Urumqi told RFA’s Uyghur Service that Hebibulla Tohti was convicted in May under charges that were not immediately clear, nearly a year after he voluntarily relocated to Xinjiang from Cairo to “register” himself with the government.

Thousands of Uyghurs, many of whom are students studying at Cairo's prestigious Al-Azhar Islamic University, have returned to Xinjiang from Egypt after Chinese police detained many of their relatives and threatened them with "severe punishment" if they did not return.

Many have since been detained, forced to undergo political reeducation, and jailed by authorities in Xinjiang, where Uyghurs regularly complain of pervasive ethnic discrimination, religious repression, and cultural suppression under Chinese rule in the region.

Tohti, who is from Kashgar (in Chinese, Kashi) city, in Xinjiang's Kashgar prefecture, had graduated with an undergraduate degree from Xinjiang Islamic University and was one of three students sent by China's Islamic Association to Al-Azhar, where he pursued a doctorate degree in theology.

Upon completion of his studies in September 2015, he received official praise from the association for defending his dissertation and obtaining his degree.

Tohti relocated to Urumqi in July last year, as ordered by Chinese authorities, but was immediately detained and interrogated upon his return for committing three "illegal activities" while studying at Al-Azhar, the faculty member said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The three activities consisted of teaching religion to Uyghur students in Egypt without permission from the Chinese authorities, attending a major religious conference in Saudi Arabia in 2015 without permission from the Chinese authorities, and emphasizing the distinct achievements of the Uyghur culture in his dissertation paper, he said.

Additionally, Tohti—who is fluent in Uyghur, Mandarin Chinese, English and Arabic—had failed to write or speak out positively about Chinese policies in the Uyghur region.

Second detention

According to the faculty member, Tohti was released in January this year, at which point the director of Xinjiang Islamic University offered him a teaching position. Tohti had accepted, but was detained again in March, he said.

"I know that he was detained ... by state security police, which is why we have been unable to hire him," the faculty member said.

"He couldn't pass a security check, so the relevant police department warned our administration not to hire him."

Tohti was sentenced to 10 years in prison for "illegal religious activity" in May, he said, though there has been no official announcement of his conviction or what charges he had faced.

The faculty member referred further questions to Xinjiang Islamic University administrators Ali Rahman, Elijan Inayet and Ma Yanling, though RFA was unable to reach them by phone.

A police officer named Abduweli at the Bahuliang Police Station in Urumqi was initially unsure of Tohti's identity when contacted by RFA, noting that authorities had "detained many from that [Xinjiang Islamic University] school district."

When informed of the scholar's background at Al-Azhar, however, he was able to confirm his arrest.

"Our police chief was directly involved in detaining that man, so you should call him," he said.

Calls to the police chief rang unanswered, while sources at the Urumqi Judicial Department declined to provide details about Tohti's case.

Observers say that Tohti was likely targeted by authorities as being "double-faced," according to Xinjiang Party Secretary Chen Quanguo's recent campaign to punish influential Uyghurs who appear loyal to China's ruling Communist Party, but secretly promote the interests of their ethnic group.

China's Communist Party blames some Uyghurs for a string of violent attacks and clashes in China in recent years, but critics say the government has exaggerated the threat from the ethnic group, and that repressive domestic policies are responsible for violence that has left hundreds dead since 2009.

China regularly conducts "strike hard" campaigns in Xinjiang, 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.

Reported and translated by Shohret Hoshur for RFA's Uyghur Service. Written in English by Joshua Lipes.

China bans Christian summer camps and Sunday schools

Evangelical Focus (03.08.2017) - <https://wfm.org/articles/47231/> - Chinese officials in Zhejiang province have issued orders to shut down Sunday schools and prevent Christian churches from holding events during the summer months.

"For a long time, teenagers and students have not been allowed to participate in religious activities", a local Christian surnamed Zhang said.

However, "the Three-Self Churches and house churches would usually hold summer camps during the summer vacation. But now the government has emphasized that even the Sunday schools would be closed down. The government's major intention is to shut down the Sunday schools", he added.

Christian camps also banned in Henan province

The orders came after another Chinese province banned Christian churches from organizing youth camps this summer.

Henan Provincial Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee and the Henan Provincial China Christian Council—local branches of China's two state-run Christian organizations—announced the ban last June in an official document, citing high temperatures as a possible health risk.

"The temperature is very high during the summer. To conform to the country's related legal policies on youth health, no summer camps that involve youth and students shall be organized by any church", they stated.

A Christian from the province noted that the ban was an unusual move since such camps have been allowed in previous summers. Prior to the ban, the government would only interfere if they received a tip-off about the event.

Joining the three-self church, mandatory

In order to further their control, the Nanyang Municipal Religious Affairs Bureau, located in Henan, ordered all 20,000 registered house church members in the province to join the Three-Self Church.

Many Chinese Christians disagree with the Three-Self Church based on theological discrepancies and rampant government censorship, making the forced merging of these two branches a violation of religious freedom.

Foreign students unable to practice their religion

Officials in the province also announced new regulations forbidding foreign students at universities in the province from participating in any form of religious activities on campus, such as preaching or religious gatherings.

The regulations will ban students from practising their religious beliefs on campus and require them to take courses in political theory as well as Chinese law, culture, and customs. This will effectively prohibit them from holding religious gatherings or preaching on school property.

Schools in China are required to respect the customs and religious beliefs of foreign students, but they are not allowed to provide any venue for religious activities.

Persecution in China

"The government is trying to control ideology. During [Chinese Presidents] Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao's time, the government was tolerant toward preaching and missionary work. After Xi Jinping came into power, the government's grip on religion has strengthened", Zhang told China Aid.

Hundreds of pastors and Christian activists have been arrested in China recent years for protesting against the forced demolition of churches. China's atheistic government has labelled Christian gatherings as a national security risk.

According to a report published by Freedom House in March, as many as 100 million people, including Protestant Christians, are facing "high" or "very high" levels of persecution at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party.

Controversies around the kidnapping and killing of two Chinese Christians by ISIS in Pakistan

HRWF (27.07.2017) - In June, the Islamic State killed two Chinese Christians it kidnapped in Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan province a month before, according to the militant group's Amaq news agency.

Armed men pretending to be policemen kidnapped Lee Zingyang (24) from Hunan and Meng Lisi (26) from Hubei in Central China, in the provincial capital, Quetta, on 24th May. The kidnapping was a rare security incident involving Chinese nationals in Pakistan, where Beijing has pledged \$57 billion for its "Belt and Road" plan.

After the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the killings, Pakistan's Interior Ministry said the two Chinese nationals were "actually engaged in preaching" after they went to Quetta "under the garb of learning (the) Urdu language from a Korean national."

Official Chinese media said they were working for Seo Jun-won, a Korean missionary, and China would cooperate with Pakistan on any investigations into "illegal evangelization."

An official from South Korea's foreign ministry rejected these allegations.

The comments from Seoul deepen the mystery behind the abduction and deaths of the two Chinese.

Family fears for 'barely alive' Chinese pastor as authorities abuse him in prison

China Aid (17.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2uavhH3> - After reports leaked that an imprisoned pastor in China's central Henan province endured torture at the hands of his captors, his sister testified that her brother appeared fragile when she met with him on Friday and was not allowed to discuss events outside of the prison with him.

When Zhang Cuixia visited her brother, unjustly imprisoned Nanle Church pastor Zhang Shaojie, on July 7, she said he looked "...like a bag of bones," and dark discoloration circled his eyes, prompting her to ask if he had been beaten. In reply, he said, "Do you need to be beaten to become like this?"

However, a few weeks ago, Zhang Shaojie's daughter, Esther Zhang, penned a worried appeal, saying that officials repaid her father's attempts to file a second court appeal with a strict torture regimen.

"He's unable to see the sun during the day," Esther Zhang wrote. "He's deprived of sleep for 24 hours at a time. The prison gives him only one steamed bun a day and intentionally starves him. According to people who have been released from that prison, my father is barely alive, suffering both mentally and physically."

During the visit, government agents monitored Zhang Cuixia and Zhang Shaojie's conversation, limiting it to only talk about family members and praise of new policies under Communist Party leader Xi Jinping. Zhang Shaojie and Zhang Cuixia decided to subvert these restrictions, speaking highly of life inside and outside the prison and using their facial expressions to communicate that they meant the opposite.

Following their conversation, Zhang Cuixia wept.

"It's painful to see such a good person being persecuted," she said. "I don't know how long he can persist."

Additionally, she said authorities have tried to keep Zhang's lawyer from meeting with him, often telling him no one was available to talk to him. The last time he visited, he wasn't even allowed in.

Zhang Shaojie became one of the first pastors of a government-run Three-Self Church to be sentenced to 12 years in prison since the Cultural Revolution when his church became involved in a land dispute with the government in 2013. He led a group of Christians to Beijing to file a petition, but the trip angered local officials, who conspired to have him detained on Nov. 16, 2013, and charged him with "swindling" and "assembling a crowd to disturb public order" on July 4, 2014. Authorities rejected his initial appeal to overturn his sentence in August 2014.

In an official document dated May 18, 2017, the Puyang, Henan branches of China's two state-run Christian organizations—the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee and the China Christian Council—arbitrarily deposed 12 of the church's clergymen, including Zhang Shaojie himself, and revoked their ordination. The other 11 church leaders were ousted because of their connections to Zhang Shaojie and their willingness to faithfully serve the church, causing the government to want to get rid of them.

Recently, Zhang's lawyer filed an appeal to have his sentence overturned.

The church, which began as a house church, was ultimately forced to subject itself to government censorship and become a Three-Self Church. The church's members also said the Nanle County Religious Affairs Bureau alleged that the church was a cult and appealed to the Henan Provincial Religious Affairs Bureau to obliterate it. The higher authorities rejected the request.

Zhang Shaojie's decline in health is preceded by that of Nobel Peace Prize laureate and imprisoned Chinese democracy activist Liu Xiaobo, whose prison doctors ignored the signs of his late-stage liver cancer until May 24. Liu died at 6:40 p.m. today. In order to prevent another innocent man from succumbing to such cruel tactics, ChinaAid urges government officials and individuals to contact the following authorities and urge them to treat Zhang Shaojie humanely and allow him access to medical professionals outside of the prison:

Minister of Justice Zhang Jun

Phone number: +86 (10) 6515 3113

E-mail: ivylee319@vip.sina.com (begin subject line with ATTN: Minister of Justice Zhang Jun)

Ambassador Cui Tiankai

Ambassador of China to the United States

Email: chinaembpress_us@mfa.gov.cn

Phone: [+1\(202\) 495-2266](tel:+1(202)495-2266)

Ambassador Liu Jieyi

Ambassador of China to the United Nations

Email: chinamission_un@mfa.gov.cn

ChinaAid firmly condemns the Communist Party's treatment of Zhang Shaojie and the 12 leaders of Nanle Church and exposes the abuses enacted against them in order to stand in solidarity with persecuted Christians and promote religious freedom, human rights, and rule of law.

USCIRF condemns Ramadan restrictions in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region

"The Chinese government has taken unprecedented steps to trample on the religious freedom of Uighur Muslims"

USCIRF (05.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2thQb6D> - Muslims around the world recently marked the end of the holy month of Ramadan. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) strongly condemns the Chinese government's restrictions on Uighur Muslims' religious practice during Ramadan in the autonomous region of Xinjiang.

"The Chinese government has taken unprecedented steps to trample on the religious freedom of Uighur Muslims particularly during Ramadan," said USCIRF Chairman Daniel Mark. "Chinese Communist Party officials were assigned to live in the homes of Uighur families in Xinjiang to prevent them from fasting and praying. This new level of control is yet another example of the Chinese government's unacceptable repression of Uighur Muslims. We call on Beijing to abide by its international human rights commitments and cease its harassment of religious communities."

The Chinese government continues to suppress Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, often under the guise of countering what it alleges to be religious and other violent extremism. Other recent alarming developments include: new regulations prohibiting face-covering veils and beards; a ban on "extreme" Islamic baby names; and the confiscation of Uighur Muslims' passports and Qur'ans.

Uighur Muslims also continue to receive unfair trials and are harshly treated in prison. USCIRF Vice Chair, Sandra Jolley, is advocating on behalf of Uighur Muslim Gulmira Imin, as part of USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project. Ms. Imin, a website administrator and Uighur advocate, was sentenced in May 2010 to life imprisonment on charges of splittism (undermining the unity of the state), organizing an illegal demonstration, and leaking state secrets.

"Eight years ago today, July 5, 2009, Uighurs gathered in Urumqi to peacefully protest the Chinese government's treatment of their people. The protests were met with police violence and a number of arrests and deaths occurred. Gulmira Imin was arrested in connection with these riots and her harsh sentence is yet another example of the government's persistent targeting of Uighur Muslims," said Vice Chair Jolley. "The Chinese government should immediately release Gulmira Imin, prominent Uighur scholar Ilham Tohti, and all other prisoners of conscience."

USCIRF again recommended in 2017 that China be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. The State Department has designated China as a CPC since 1999, most recently in 2016.

We must hold Beijing to account for its treatment of Falun Gong practitioners

By Anastasia Lin

The Globe and Mail (28.06.2017) - <https://tgam.ca/2uqIVUv> - On June 19, I travelled to Geneva to testify before the United Nations Human Rights Council. I spoke on behalf of a Canadian woman named Sun Qian, who's been imprisoned in China since February. The sole reason for her arrest was her spiritual belief. Sun Qian is a Falun Gong practitioner, and she has faced solitary confinement and torture in custody.

Toward the end of my speech, I switched from English to Mandarin. Suddenly, the Chinese delegate started banging on the table to stop my speech. Later on, Chinese delegate Yang Junzhi took the floor to respond.

China, said Mr. Yang, "expresses strong indignation and resolute opposition to the unfounded claims of some NGOs," in a clear reference to me. He asserted that Falun Gong is not a religion, but an "evil cult," which propagates "evil theories" and causes "grave physical and psychological harms" to its practitioners. But his most extraordinary claim was that the government of China has "arranged help for those tricked into practising Falun Gong

What is the truth about Falun Gong?

Falun Gong is a practice of five meditative exercises and a set of moral teachings. At its core, the basic tenets of Falun Gong are shared with many faiths. It is a belief that the universe has not just a material existence, but a spiritual one. That there is such a thing as a moral order – rooted in principles of truth, compassion, and tolerance – and that human life is enriched by striving to live in harmony with these ideals.

The popularity of these beliefs – official sources estimated there were 70 million practitioners in China by 1999 – is what caused the Communist Party to see Falun Gong as an ideological challenge, ultimately leading to a massive and ongoing campaign to eliminate it. According to the NGO Freedom House, since 1999, hundreds of thousands of Falun Gong practitioners across China have been subjected to arbitrary imprisonment and torture, solely for the peaceful expression of their beliefs. Thousands have died as a result of abuse in custody, and there is credible evidence that large numbers of Falun Gong detainees have been killed so their organs could be sold for profit.

The Chinese government uses propaganda and misinformation to undercut sympathy for Falun Gong. One method is calling Falun Gong an "evil cult" – a label that evokes visceral negative responses. The Chinese government claims, with no credible evidence, that practising Falun Gong leads to madness, murder, and suicide. Its media outlets report that practitioners are incapable of rational thought, thereby providing justification for the arbitrary imprisonment and forcible ideological reprogramming of innocent, law-abiding people. Sometimes they refer to Falun Gong practitioners as literal vermin – as "rats" that need to be smashed.

This should cause deep concern in the West. We know where this kind of dehumanizing rhetoric can lead, because we've seen it before in Nazi Germany, in Rwanda, in Bosnia. But instead of condemning it, we perpetuate it. We allow the Chinese government to set the terms of the debate.

In the West, Falun Gong is obviously not persecuted. But it suffers another kind of indignity: being marginalized, ignored, or softly belittled. News organizations refer to

Falun Gong “members,” despite the fact that the practice has no system of membership. In far too many instances, Falun Gong is described merely as a group that was banned as a cult in China, a claim that is historically inaccurate and extremely prejudicial. Critical analysis of the Chinese government’s propagandist rhetoric is almost entirely absent from the journalistic discourse.

This isn’t entirely surprising; the Chinese government is powerful. Through its network of state-run media and the enormous commercial and political power it wields, it has a tremendous ability to influence how the Western world understands China. In the past, the party-state has successfully persuaded foreign publications to kill sympathetic stories on Falun Gong or to white-wash documentaries on its persecution.

This persecution is a human-rights catastrophe, yet it is often overlooked because the victims – Falun Gong practitioners like myself – are somehow seen as unworthy of sympathy.

Collectively, we have been more responsive to the slander of a dictatorship than the victims’ cries. But we still have a chance to stop further killing in China. Sun Qian is still imprisoned in China. It’s time to bring her home.

Holy See appeals for the release of Bishop Shao of Wenzhou

ZENIT (26.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2tnNlhk> - The Holy See expressed its “grave concern” after the disappearance of Msgr. Pierre Shao Zhumin, Bishop of Wenzhou, in the coastal province of Zhejiang (Continental China). A statement released by Director of the Holy See Press Office, Greg Burke, on June 26, 2017, pleads for his return, stressing the need to foster “ways of understanding.” The Chinese diocese has had no news regarding the Bishop since May 18.

“The Holy See is observing with grave concern the personal situation of Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin of Wenzhou, forcibly removed from his episcopal see some time ago,” reads the statement. At age 54, he has been bishop of his diocese since the death of his predecessor in September 2016.

“The diocesan Catholic community and his relatives have no news or reasons for his removal, nor do they know where he is being held,” specifies Burke. “In this respect, the Holy See, profoundly saddened for this and other similar episodes that unfortunately do not facilitate ways of understanding, expresses the hope that Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin may return as soon as possible to the diocese and that he can be assured the possibility of serenely exercising his episcopal ministry.”

“We are all invited to pray for Bishop Shao Zhumin and for the path of the Catholic Church in China,” concluded the message.

According to the Churches of Asia Agency (EDA) of the Foreign Missions of Paris, Bishop Wenzhou disappeared from circulation after having been “invited” last May 18 to an interview with functionaries of the local Office of Religious Affairs. Since then, the Bishop has not reappeared in public. On May 22, he made it know that he was in need of wine for Mass, but no one was able to contact him on his mobile phone. According to local sources, Monsignor Shao is in Wenzhou, retained in a police residence.

EDA offered an analysis of the situation, estimating that the diocese of Wenzhou “could be described as emblematic of the efforts the Holy See deploys to foster the unity of the

'underground' communities and the 'official' local Church." Efforts, notes the agency, that evidently do not satisfy the Chinese authorities. "

In view of fostering the unity of the two communities, in 2007 Rome appointed Father Vincent Zhu Weifang, member of the "official" clergy, Bishop of Wenzhou, with Father Shao Zhumin, member of the "underground" clergy as Co-adjutor. However, after the death of Monsignor Zhu on September 7, 2016 his successor Monsignor Shao came up against "permanent manoeuvres of interference by the civil authorities in the life of the Church." He never stopped "being subjected to the harassment of the authorities."

"With this new 'incommunicado' episode that is prolonged, one could think that the young Bishop is facing renewed pressures by the authorities to lead him to come to terms with the religious policy of the government in place," concludes EDA.

Wenzhou, 20 days and still no news of Msgr. Peter Shao Zhumin, seized by police

The bishop disappeared after being called for a meeting with the Office for Religious Affairs. Bishop Shao is recognized by the Vatican, but not by the government. The bishop's mother, 90, asks to be able to see her son. Catholics in Wenzhou ask for prayers for their shepherd, so he may be "strong" in faith and witness. In the past some underground bishops were killed while in police hands.

AsiaNews (06.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2rYoYp1> - There is still no news of Msgr. Peter Shao Zhumin, Ordinary Bishop of Wenzhou (Zhejiang). The diocese's faithful are very concerned, and with them also the bishop's mother, a 90-year-old woman who has already asked several times to see her son.

Msgr. Shao, 54, disappeared last May 18, after being invited at 9 am to the office for religious affairs in the city. His whereabouts remain unknown. On May 22, he made a request to his co-workers to have wine for the celebration of Mass, but since then nothing has been heard.

Priests and faithful say they do not know where he is and the authorities will tell them nothing.

A message sent to AsiaNews by a member of the faithful asks for "prayers to God to guide him to have a strong faith and a clear witness."

Msgr. Shao had been kidnapped already in April, a few days ahead of Easter, perhaps to prevent him from commemorating the rites of Holy Week with the faithful and his priests.

Bishop Shao is a member of the underground community and as a bishop is not recognized by the government. The Holy See, however, confirmed him as ordinary bishop of the diocese, after the death of his predecessor, Msgr. Vincenzo Zhu Weifang, on September 7th.

It is most likely that his forced disappearance aims to persuade the prelate to enroll in the Patriotic Association (PA), the party body that wants to build an independent Church, which is "inconsistent with Catholic doctrine "as Benedict XVI affirms in his 2007 Letter to Chinese Catholics, a position confirmed by Pope Francis.

In talks between China and the Holy See on episcopal appointments, the PA demands that all bishops be enrolled in the PA and that bishops who refuse to enroll be excluded as they are "unreliable".

In the past years, unofficial bishops, seized by the police, were returned to their family after being tortured. These include are Msgr. Giuseppe Fan Xueyan of Baoding (killed in 1992); Msgr. Giovanni Gao Kexian of Yantai (died in 2004); Msgr. John Han Dingxian (died in 2007)

Msgr Peter Shao Zhumin, is a bishop since 2007. The Wenzhou diocese has a past of strong divisions between the official and underground Christian communities. It is estimated that there are about 120,000 faithful in the official community and over 80,000 in the underground one. The priests are equally divided between the two branches and are around 50 in all. In recent years, the Holy See has sought to reconcile the communities by nominating Msgr. Zhu (now deceased) as Ordinary Bishop and Msgr. Shao as bishop with right of succession. But, according to the faithful, who also love and respect Msgr. Shao, "the local government does everything it can to keep us divided." Bishop Shao has often been imprisoned because of his faith. Even ahead of the funeral of his predecessor, he was kidnapped and unable to preside at the rite.

Fujian church banned after accusation of 'Korean collaboration'

ChinaAid (12.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2qiSpRG> - Authorities in China's coastal Fujian province banned a church, accusing its members of "establishing religious sites" without approval and "collaborating with Korea."

In a notice, authorities accused the River of Life Berean Church and the Bereans Research Institute of Theology of having Korean connections and setting up illegal religious meeting places. The Huli District Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau also confiscated 1,346 Yuan (approx. U.S. \$200) of donated money, claiming it was "illegal income."

A lawyer who examined the case said that the church is uncertain whether or not they should take legal action against the government. "They are afraid of fighting against the government. I asked local lawyers to help, but they haven't responded yet. The mainland [government] has intensified the persecution against Christianity. ... It is ridiculous to arrest someone for attending house churches. The government often uses the excuse that Christians are 'disrupting social order' to persecute them, since that can be applied to every house church in the country."

Another Christian pastor surnamed Zhang criticized the government's handling of the church, saying that even though River of Life Berean Church has some controversial beliefs, it is not considered a cult by the government and therefore, should not be targeted in this way.

"Since the government can't accuse the church of collaborating with the U.S., the officers now use Korea as an excuse," Zhang said. "Since religions are founded in different countries, the people are unavoidably 'collaborating with foreign powers' when they choose a religious belief. Jesus himself was a foreigner. This logic is ridiculous. Our government has armed itself to the teeth in order to control people's minds."

River of Life Berean Church was founded eight years ago, and has a weekly attendance of several dozen members.

Police raid at the underground Catholic Mass in Heilongjiang

Acting together, the Religious Affairs Bureau, Public Security and the United Front carried out the operation. Seized before Easter, the bishop of Wenzhou is back home. Bishop Guo Xijin of Mindong is still in police custody. The confrontation with the Vatican increases.

AsiaNews.it (27.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2qdHlpK> - Heilongjiang's Communist authorities congratulated themselves for "blocking illegal religious activities".

When police raided a small community hall during Mass, they ransacked the place and tried to arrest the parish priest and the community's lay leader.

The action was taped and the video was briefly posted on-line (*pictured*). In it, several police agents can be seen discussing animatedly with worshippers and trying to remove Fr Shen Yanjun, an underground priest who took up his post in the church in Qinshan (Wudalianchi) seven months ago.

In a statement, local authorities said they "successfully stopped an underground Catholic priest from holding an illegal religious activity."

The police raid was a joint operation between the Religious Affairs Bureau, Public Security and the United Front.

Since they are opposed to a dialogue between the Chinese government and the Holy See, the Religious Affairs Ministry and the United Front (which includes the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association) continue to clash with the Church and the Vatican.

Before Easter they seized two underground bishops – [Mgr Vincent Guo Xijin](#) of Mindong and [Mgr Peter Shao Zhumin](#) of Wenzhou – to prevent them from celebrating Easter services in their respective diocese.

Both are recognised by the Holy See but not by the government. Sources told *AsiaNews* that Mgr Shao is now back home whilst Mgr Guo's whereabouts remain unknown.

Village crackdown on 'illegal religious activities' nets dozens of Uyghurs

Radio Free Asia (26.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2oS34PR> - Dozens of ethnic Uyghurs from a small village in northwestern China's Xinjiang region, including several sets of siblings, have been swept up in a recent crackdown on "illegal religious activities" after they attended lectures by unsanctioned imams, according to local officials.

At least 52 Uyghurs in Tomosteng township's No. 2 village, in Kashgar (in Chinese, Kashi) prefecture's Yarkand (Shache) county, have been arrested under related charges, the 140-household village's party secretary Ablet Hekim told RFA's Uyghur Service in an interview earlier this week.

Of those arrests, 39 were the result of a “recent” sweep by local authorities, Hekim said, adding that 35 are now in jail and the remaining four—all of whom are “unofficial imams” that the state does not recognize—have been sent for “political reeducation.”

The other 13 have been serving sentences “since previous sweeps during the 2000s,” according to the party secretary.

“This week we have handed down verdicts for 13 out of the 35 [now held in jail] and delivered the official notices to their families, door to door,” Hekim said.

Sentences for the 13 ranged from two-and-a-half to 10 years in prison.

“The 35 listened to ‘illegal religious sermons’ at least two times, because we usually only warn one-time listeners and let them go,” he said.

According to Hekim, the sermons did not contain any sensitive references to “dividing the country” or anti-government rhetoric often linked to unsanctioned religious activities.

“They were sentenced simply because they had listened to sermons by the unofficial imam Abdukerim at an unauthorized venue [outside of a government sanctioned-mosque],” he said.

Hekim provided RFA with a list of all 35 Uyghurs held amid the crackdown, as well as their ages.

Among the 35, three women—Buhelish Nur, Heyrinsa Ehmet and Patima Seyittursun—were punished for “inviting people to attend” the sermons, he said.

At least five sets of siblings were jailed as part of the recent sweep, including brothers Ahmat, Tursun and Imin Zayit, as well as sister and brother Nurimangul and Memet Talip.

“Ahmat Zayit’s family has no one of working age left at home, so there is no one maintaining their fields,” he Hekim said.

“His kids have been taken in by his nephew’s family.”

Report of arrest

RFA obtained confirmation of the 52 arrests in No. 2 village while investigating a report published last week by exile Uyghur website Hoylam.com, which claimed that a 73-year-old Uyghur woman named Helchihan Hoshur was detained after making disparaging comments about Chinese policies during a “self-criticism” session in Tomosteng township’s neighboring No. 7 village.

Party secretaries from three different villages in Tomosteng township, including No. 3 village chief Qembernisa Hashim, were unable to confirm Hoshur’s detention.

“We do not have anybody like that—all the detainees in our village are males,” Hashim told RFA, without providing details about the detainees there.

“We would have recognized her, since we conduct a lot of political educational work with her family members.”

RFA was unable to confirm the identities of the male detainees from No. 7 village or the reason for their arrests.

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.

While China blames Uyghur extremists for terrorist attacks, experts outside China say Beijing has exaggerated the threat from the Uyghurs and that repressive domestic policies are responsible for an upsurge in violence there that has left hundreds dead since 2009.

Xinjiang court gives 5 Christians harsh sentences

ChinaAid (25.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2ponQrz> - In a move that a defense attorney termed harsh, five Christians in China's northwestern Xinjiang were jailed for 3-5 years on April 18 for participating in the planning of a Bible study.

On April 18, a court in Changji, Xinjiang, sentenced Christians Yang Zhaocun and Wang Lulu to five years in prison, Cheng Yajie to four years, and Liu Yan and Zheng Lan to three years. Officials tried the defendants last October on charges of illegal assembly and "gathering a crowd to disturb public order," after they held a private Christian event at Zheng Lan's home. The court did not notify the defense lawyers of the court's verdict.

One defense attorney said, "The judges wrongfully determined the nature of the case, and the sentences were unreasonably harsh. How can private gatherings disrupt public order? The public security bureau exceeded its authority and crossed a line."

During the trial, Wang and Cheng admitted that they participated in an "illegal assembly," and Zheng confessed to hosting so-called "illegal religious activities."

Their supposed crimes stem from a gathering of more than 50 Christians at Zheng's home on March 5, 2016, where the congregants studied the Bible and listened to sermons. According to a government document, Yang and Liu were responsible for researching potential meeting places and transporting the meeting's attendees, activities which make them accessories to crime, while the others were labeled primary criminals. When authorities raided the gathering, Yang, Zheng, Cheng, and Wang were taken into custody, while Liu was seized at her home.

All of the defendants plead innocent, and all are planning to appeal.

Did members of the Church of Almighty God (CAG) perpetrate the 28 May 2014 McDonald's Murder in Zhaoyuan?

CAG members interviewed in Seoul by HRWF answer NO and accuse Beijing of propaganda against their church

Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (21.04.2017) - From July 2013 to 2017, over five-hundred members of the Church of the Almighty God (CAG) [1] from China have travelled to South Korea to seek asylum, but not one has been granted refugee status, nor given the permit to stay for humanitarian reasons. None of them have been prosecuted on the grounds of criminal activities in South Korea and so far, no one has been deported back to China. They are however under threat to be surrendered to the Chinese authorities at any time.

In March 2017, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* met some CAG members at their church in Seoul and interviewed them with an interpreter about the 28 May 2014 McDonald's Murder Case in Zhaoyuan. The answers below are those of Angelia Zheng, a spokesperson of the religious group in Seoul.



Reception desk at CAG, Seoul

The murder

On 28 May 2014, Zhang Fan, Zhang LiDong, Lyu Yingchun, Zhang Hang, Zhang Qiao and a 12-year-old child walked through a McDonald's in Zhaoyuan, in Shandong, soliciting phone numbers from diners. One woman, Wu Shuoyan, 37, was waiting in the restaurant with her seven-year-old son; when she refused to give her number, the group beat her to death with chairs and a metal mop handle. Zhang Fan and Lyu Yingchun reportedly called the victim an "evil spirit," before Zhang bludgeoned her head with a chair, then jumped on her and trampled her head, state media reported at the time of their conviction in October 2014.

The act was captured by CCTV cameras and witnesses using smartphones. The footage quickly went viral online, with many web users wondering why bystanders did not intervene.

Along with Falun Gong, the Church of Almighty God [2]– also called Eastern Lightning – has been on a list of fourteen banned religious groups, issued by China's Ministry of Public Security, since 1995.

Zhang LiDong and Zhang Fan were executed in east China's Shandong Province on 2 February 2015, following the approval of the use of the death penalty by the Supreme People's Court. The pair had been convicted of committing intentional homicide in the province's Zhaoyuan City.

The three other members of the group involved in the incident (Lyu Yingchun, Zhang Hang, and Zhang Qiao) were sentenced to jail terms ranging from seven years to life. Before the execution, Yantai Municipal Intermediate People's Court arranged for Zhang Fan and Zhang LiDong to meet with their family. (Source: Euan McKirdy, CNN, 2 February 2015)

The interview

HRWF: What can you say about the links between the murder at the McDonald's restaurant and the Church of Almighty God?

On the third day after the murder happened, on 31 May 2014, the "Focus Interview" of CCTV, which has a good audience rating in China, broadcasted a fragment of the journalist's interview with Zhang LiDong, the main offender. In this interview, Zhang LiDong claimed he had believed in the Almighty God for seven years. However the Almighty God that Zhang LiDong and his accomplices were talking about had nothing to do with our Church of the Almighty God (CAG).

Zhang LiDong and his accomplices in the murder were not CAG members at all and the Church of Almighty God (CAG) has nothing to do with the 28 May McDonald's Murder Case which occurred in Zhaoyuan, Shandong in 2014.

The Chinese Communist Party asserted that Zhang LiDong and his associates were CAG members because they found some books of the CAG at their homes. They used these facts and the false statement of Zhang LiDong to put the murder case on the CAG. We have no idea how Zhang LiDong received our books.

HRWF: Which aspects of the beliefs of the murderers made you first think that they were not CAG members?

Zhang LiDong said in his confession that some people would leave the earth and go back to heaven, from where they would lead him. His viewpoint of belief in God doesn't accord with the words of Almighty God at all. The Church of Almighty God never said such a thing.

Besides, the CCP said that Zhang LiDong and the other offenders beat the woman to death because she refused to give them her phone number to preach the gospel to her. As all the members of the Church of Almighty God know, it's not allowed to forcefully drag people into the church. In the administrative decrees issued by the Church of Almighty God, it clearly says, "God's household is not short of members, and there is no need to make up its numbers with people who have no use. All those who do not believe gladly must not be led into the church" (The Word Appears in the Flesh). If Zhang LiDong had been a CAG member for seven years, he should have known the essential administrative decree of the church. Obviously, Zhang LiDong was not a member of the Church of Almighty God at all.

On 21 August 2014, the Intermediate People's Court in Yantai City, Shandong Province held a hearing of the "May 28 Zhaoyuan Case." From the confessions of Lyu Yingchun and Zhang Fan, it's easy to conclude that Zhang LiDong and his accomplices were not members of the Church of Almighty God. Lyu Yingchun said in her confession, "I'm Lyu Yingchun. I came to know Almighty God in December 1998. From childhood I knew that I am God Himself..." She also said, "In the end, I found that I'm God Himself. Then I found that only Zhang LiDong, Zhang Fan, and Zhang Hang are true believers in 'Almighty God'; the others are all cheaters." "Zhang Fan and I are the only true spokespersons of 'Almighty God.' ... Theirs is the false 'Almighty God,' while ours is the true 'Almighty God.'" Zhang Fan said, "In the organization of Almighty God, Lyu Yingchun and I hold the highest position. We're both 'God Himself.' My father, my sister, my brother, and Zhang Qiaolian are all 'chief priests.' Now I think that only my father, my brother, my sister, Lyu Yingchun, Zhang Qiaolian, and I are true believers in 'Almighty God.'"

Zhang LiDong and his accomplices totally lost their senses, even daring to impersonate God. In our teachings, "The Ten Administrative Decrees That Must Be Obeyed by God's Chosen People", it is clearly stated: "Man should not magnify himself, nor exalt himself. He should worship and exalt God."

However, the CCP insisted that Zhang LiDong and the others were members of the Church of Almighty God, which is sheer distortion of facts and frame-up.

HRWF: How is someone recognized as a member of your church?

New believers must be checked and approved by the church leaders and deacons of the local community before being received into the church. Only those who truly believe in God and have good humanity are accepted. When expelling the adherents, the decision must be made by 80%+ of the believers in the church. The leaders and the deacons know exactly who is and who is not a member of the church. After the Chinese Communist Party made use of the 28 May McDonald's Murder Case to persecute the Church of Almighty God in 2014, the CAG conducted a careful survey. According to the findings, none of the church leaders or adherents in the branch churches in Shangdong was acquainted with Zhang LiDong, Zhang Fan and their associates. The six of them have never been in the CAG.

HRWF: Can you tell me more about the trial of the murderers?

On 21 August 2014, Yantai Intermediate People's Court of Shangdong openly heard the 28 May McDonald's Murder Case. During the hearing, Zhang LiDong and his associates said that they had nothing to do with the Church of Almighty God.

The Chinese Communist Party claimed that Zhang LiDong was a CAG preacher and made an attempt to kill that lady after demanding her cellphone number in vain. They concluded that they promoted their religion with violence. This conclusion was seriously against the truth. The CAG never imposed the gospel on anyone. So it is impossible for the preachers to beat people when preaching the gospel.

As all the CAG members know, we have principles in preaching the gospel. As stipulated in The Ten Administrative Decrees That Must Be Obeyed by God's Chosen People issued by our church, "God's household is not short of members, and there is no need to make up its numbers with people who have no use. All those who do not believe gladly must not be led into the church." (The Word Appears in the Flesh)

HRWF: Does the Church of Almighty God teach that violence can sometimes be used?

The Chinese Communist Party has been fabricating rumors according to which the CAG members preach the gospel with violence, cut people's noses and eyes when they refuse and use violence against those they want to convert and even kill them cruelly. As a matter of fact, it has been over twenty years, since 1991, that the gospel of the Almighty God has been spread throughout Mainland China. It has also been preached in over twenty overseas countries. If what the Chinese Communist Party said proved to be true, the CAG would have shed blood abroad everywhere. This is not the case anywhere.

HRWF: How was the persecution of group organized in China?

In a short period of three days after the 28 May McDonald's Murder Case, the Chinese Communist Party used the media to wantonly fabricate public opinions and define the nature of the murder case, which jumped before the judicial investigation and trial procedure. The focus point was directed to the CAG, who had nothing to do with the murder case. They openly defined the CAG as a cult organization and ordered a mobilization of the nationwide campaign "One-Hundred-Day Battle", aiming to crack down on the CAG [3]. On 15 July 2014, the Chinese Communist Party convened a symposium of cracking down on the CAG in the Great Hall of the People in Wenzhou City, Zhejiang Province. In August 2014, the Chinese Communist Party deployed the armed

police and regular troops on a large scale to arrest CAG members. According to statistics reported by the Chinese Communist Party media, 1,858 CAG members were arrested and several hundreds of thousands had to live in exile. Anyone with discerning eyes could easily see that the Chinese Communist Party meticulously instrumentalized the 28 May McDonald's Murder Case just to specially combat and repress the CAG.

HRWF: Did your church carry out its own investigation about the 28 May McDonald's Murder Case?

The local CAG in Zhaoyuan, Shandong, also carried out some investigation about the May murder case and tried to dig out more evidence to prove it was a case manipulated by the Chinese Communist Party.

On 16 July 2014, Song Yuan Rong, Song A, Feng, Li and Wang, five CAG members from Shandong city of Zhaoyuan, were arrested by the police of Qishan Police Station of Zhaoyuan City at a church meeting. At 5:00 p.m. on that day, the policeman, Qin DeHeng, told Song YuanRong, while interrogating her, "I've been working with the public security department for over ten years and seen too many like you. It was we who meticulously plotted the 28 May McDonald's Murder Case. I am a policeman of Zhaoyuan Public Security Bureau myself." According to our findings, Qin DeHeng has been working as a policeman for over twenty years. Now he is serving as the head of Qishan Police Station of Zhaoyuan City.

HRWF: Did your church also carry out some investigation about Zhang LiDong himself?

In the CCTV report, it was said that Zhang LiDong was unemployed, but his true identity was soon found out: he was the owner of a gold mine and a pharmaceutical corporation. He had at least three cars, and the Porsche Cayenne he drove was worth at least one million yuan. As is well-known, the state strictly prohibits private exploitation of gold mines. The fact that Zhang LiDong, a private person, could exploit gold mines shows that he had very strong official backing and was by no means an ordinary person. The CCP tried to cover up the criminal's true identity because it feared that the persons sheltering Zhang LiDong might get involved and lose their official position.

HRWF: What happened to Zhang LiDong and the other persons arrested with him?

On 11 October 2014 in the morning, according to the open announcement at the first trial court of Yantai Intermediate People's Court of Shandong, Zhang Fan and Zhang LiDong were sentenced to death. They were executed on 2 February, 2015. Lyu YingChun was sentenced to life imprisonment, Zhang Hang to ten years and Zhang QiaoLian to seven years. The last participant in the murder was a minor. (See BBC article <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-28857395>)

Disclaimer: Human Rights Without Frontiers has not investigated the teachings and the practices of the CAG and therefore does not hold any position about this religious group. The purpose of this article and interview was to collect data from various sides so that the readers can draw their own opinion about whether the CAG was involved or not involved in the 28 May 2014 McDonald's Murder Case in Zhaoyuan, which was the starting point of an indiscriminate wave of repression against CAG members.

[1] According to an article published by the Guardian on 18 August 2014 (<https://wwwn.org/articles/43232/>), "The Church of Almighty God was founded in 1989 by Zhao Weishan, a physics teacher who grew up in Henan province, central China, but fled to the US more than a decade ago. Adherents believe Jesus has returned to earth as a Chinese woman named Lightning Deng, and hold that belonging to the group will save them from an impending apocalypse. Members believe they're entrenched in a life-or-death struggle against the "Great Red Dragon" – a clear reference to the ruling Communist party.

[2] According to the same article as in the previous footnote, Maya Wang, a Hong Kong-based researcher for Human Rights Watch said "The government designating something as an 'evil cult' is a problematic concept from a human rights point of view. The McDonald's killing was terrible, and I think the people should be held accountable. But then the government has subsequently gone after members of Eastern Lightning for organising activities that weren't against the law."

[3] According to an AP press release dated 11 June 2014 (<https://wwwn.org/articles/42702/>), "Slightly more than 1,500 cult members have been detained and prison terms handed out to at least 59, the official Xinhua News Agency said Wednesday. It wasn't clear when the arrests took place, although the reports said some went back as far as two years."

Msgr. Peter Shao Zhumin, bishop of Wenzhou (underground) seized by police

By Bernardo Cervellera



AsiaNews (13.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2oHFJKO> - The bishop of Wenzhou (Zhejiang), Msgr. Peter Shao Zhumin was seized by police and taken to an unknown location. The incident occurred yesterday afternoon. Public security agents, however, have allowed the faithful to bring them some clothes to hand them over to the prelate, a sign that his kidnapping will be long term.

Msgr. Shao is a bishop of the underground Church, recognized by the Holy See as an ordinary bishop of the diocese, [after the death of his predecessor, Msgr. Vincenzo Zhu Weifang, on 7 September.](#)

The kidnapping of Msgr. Shao came just hours before the start of the Easter Triduum. One priest believes the bishop's detention is precisely to prevent him presiding at Easter rites given that he is not recognized by the government. Also, sources in Wenzhou diocese said, "Security officials wanted to prevent Bishop Shao from contacting the open Church community in Wenzhou and exercising his episcopal authority over there, such as the blessing of oils."

The fact closely resembles what has happened in recent days to another bishop, Msgr. Vincenzo Guo Xijin, also a member of the underground church, but recognized by the Holy See as an ordinary bishop of Mindong (Fujian).

It is very likely that these enforced disappearances aim to blackmail the two prelates to convince them to join the Patriotic Association (PA), the Party body which wants to establish an independent Church.

In talks between China and the Holy See on an agreement on the appointment of bishops, the CCPA continues to demand that all bishops are members of the PA, thus excluding underground bishops, who reject registration and whom the PA regards as "unreliable."

The situations of Wenzhou and Mindong represent a dangerous exception, that the Ministry of Religious Affairs wants to stamp out.

According to some experts, their abduction and the forced education of the two prelates to "study and learn" is undue pressure on the Vatican to give its endorsement of the conditions imposed by Beijing, in short that only bishops appointed independently and enrolled in the PA can exercise the ministry.

It is a very similar situation to that of Msgr. Thaddeus Ma Daqin, bishop of Shanghai, placed under house arrest from the day of his ordination because he had resigned from the PA. [Later, Msgr. Ma seems to have retracted his positions](#), expressing appreciation for the PA, but he continues to be kept in isolation.

Msgr. Pietro Shao Zhumin, 54, has been bishop since 2007. The diocese of Wenzhou has a history of strong division between the official and underground Christian communities.

It is estimated that there are about 50 thousand faithful in the Official communities and more than 80 thousand in the unofficial; there are more than 50 priests in the whole diocese.

In recent years, the Holy See sought to reconcile the communities by appointing Msgr. Zhu as ordinary bishop and Msgr. Shao as a bishop with right of succession. But, according to the faithful, who also love and respect Msgr. Shao, "the local government does everything to keep us divided." [Msgr. Shao often suffered imprisonment because of his faith](#). Even at the funeral of his predecessor, he was seized and unable to attend the funeral.

Underground Mindong Bishop Guo Xijin missing for four days

After being detained at the Religious Affairs Office in Fuan, he was taken to an undisclosed location "to study and learn." Catholics believe that he will be pressured into joining the Patriotic Association. His refusal will likely mean that he won't be allowed back to his diocese.



By Wang Zhicheng

AsiaNews.it (10.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2nYpfaW> - Mgr Vincent Guo Xijin, underground bishop of Mindong, has been missing for four days after he went to Religious Affairs Office in Fuan on 6 April.

Although not recognised by the government, Mgr Guo is the ordinary bishop of the diocese following the death of his predecessor, [Mgr Huang Shoucheng on 30 July 2016](#).

Reacting to concerns expressed by Catholics who do not know where their missing leader is, the head of Public Security in Ningde said that the bishop "needs to study and learn" and will remain in custody for 20 days for this purpose.

This has not allayed local concerns. For one, this means that the bishop will not be able to celebrate all the rituals of Holy Week and Easter. More importantly, Public Security

has not said where the bishop is "studying" so it is unlikely to anyone will be allowed to contact him.

In the diocese, the prevailing view is that the bishop is being brainwashed to get him to join and submit to the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA).

Membership in the diocese of Mindong is mostly underground Catholics, more than 80,000 out of 90,000, highly organised and capable, with more than 45 priests, 200 nuns, 300 consecrated lay women and hundreds of lay catechists.

The underground bishop is well liked and in good terms with all the faithful, even those in the official Church. For the CPCA, this is humiliating since the Holy See, after the death of Mgr Huang, confirmed Mgr Guo as his successor in the post of ordinary bishop.

According to some local priests, the CPCA is seeking confrontation with the underground community. Two years ago, police in Fuan demolished an unofficial church under construction, but in view of the underground community's size, it always left them alone without causing too many problems.

"It is impossible for the bishop to join the CPCA. He will never do it," one priest said. However, this will likely mean that he will not come back to head the diocese. For this reason, Catholics in Mindong are asking Christians to pray for Mgr Guo.

Mgr Vincent Guo Xijin, 59, was ordained coadjutor bishop of Mindong on 28 December 2008.

He became a priest in 1984. He taught in seminaries and served as the diocese's economic administrator. However, his most important work was to sustain and encourage men and women in their respective religious vocations. He equally encouraged his young seminarians to study in public universities and colleges.

As unofficial priest, he spent time in prison in 1990-92, 1993-'94, and 1996. In the late 1990s, he was briefly appointed as apostolic administrator of the diocese of Wenzhou.

The Vatican and China reach a promising accord

The deal will unify a fractured Catholic community

By Victor Gaetan, Senior International Correspondent for the National Catholic Register.

Foreign Affairs (27.03.2017) - <http://fam.ag/2o7T5sZ> - Compared in terms of state territory, economic power, or nuclear might, no two places differ more than China and Vatican City, the world's largest and smallest countries. But measured as two empires with indelible historical presence, communal identity, and cultural wealth, China and the Holy See share a lot—including a sense of time in which decades are a standard planning unit rather than weeks or months. That is why Chinese President Xi Jinping and [Pope Francis](#)' apparent resolution of a 70-year-old [power struggle](#) over who has the right to select Catholic bishops is so noteworthy.

As part of its effort to create an independent church free from outside interference in the 1950s, the Chinese regime exerted its right to appoint Catholic bishops, a sacrilege in the eyes of the Holy See, which considers ordination a papal prerogative. According to

Catholic ecclesiology, bishops secure global unity and inherit a mission traced back to the 12 apostles; it is the pope who secures this divine apostolic succession. Believers who refused to renounce Rome or recognize a state-ordained leadership created a clandestine church. Into 2012, Beijing still unilaterally named a bishop and sequestered those who defied government oversight. But since the accession of Pope Francis, Beijing and Rome have worked out an ad hoc process of mutual approvals. Since it is informal, confusion remains, disunity festers, vacancies increase, and, in theory, either side could break the fragile equilibrium. Thus: semisecret negotiations over the last three years.

Last month, Hong Kong Archbishop Cardinal John Tong Hon, 77, announced that Beijing and Rome have "[already reached consensus](#)" on episcopal appointments. According to Tong, Chinese bishops and state authorities will recommend episcopal candidates and the pope will have a "right of veto." The agreement is described as a game changer because it confirms the pope as final authority regarding bishops, but it is also a future-oriented solution not intended to resolve other persistent disagreements. It won't automatically normalize the status of remaining underground bishops, for example, and it kicks the can down the road regarding three bishops with "moral conduct problems" ordained by the Chinese without Vatican permission. The cardinal makes a point of saying that the Sino-Vatican dialogue is unrelated to challenges over territory and sovereignty from Tibetan Buddhists and Muslim Uighurs, which are essentially political.

This is not just an exercise in optics. From the church's perspective, an accord will unify a fractured Catholic community. For Francis, it also represents a model of conflict resolution and forgiveness for an ever-anxious flock. Meanwhile, it gives the pope an opportunity to indicate his disapproval of the bellicose rhetoric coming from Washington by actualizing his key mantras—that dialogue is the key to peace and Christians must build bridges, not walls.

For China, the deal effectively brings millions of "underground" Chinese Catholics and their bishops into submission by severing Vatican approval for the rival Chinese church. And for Beijing, the victory is even sweeter because the plan has the pope's imprimatur. Xi, in particular, sees value in using the Vatican to boost his image among the West and its Asian allies. According to Chinese-based Catholics with good relations to the official church, party officials were astounded at Francis' popularity on his U.S. visit, which dramatically eclipsed the Chinese leader's trip at the same time.

There's one potential loser here: if the accord leads to talks over diplomatic recognition—China is one of only a handful of countries with which the Holy See has no formal relations—Beijing will probably insist the Holy See break ties with Taiwan, the island's only European partner. Vatican diplomats expect such a demand to follow. In that case, Francis will likely agree to break ties with Taiwan because the Holy See has effectively prepared the ground for a rupture by leaving the nuncio position vacant since 1971, when the People's Republic of China replaced Taiwan as a member of the United Nations Security Council. The Holy See's sign in Taipei, still attached at the entrance, can simply be taken down and an apostolic representative can continue work. The large Taiwan embassy (on Via della Conciliazione, only 300 feet from the Vatican) could be given the status of a delegation.

Some critics point out that the church itself may be compromised by the deal. Last November, China's most senior cleric, Cardinal Joseph Zen, retired archbishop of Hong

Kong, gave Francis quite a slap in a [Wall Street Journal](#) interview titled “The Vatican’s Illusions About Chinese Communism.” Citing Francis’ friendliness toward China—he wrote a congratulatory letter to Xi, who was elected just a day after Francis in 2013; he [extolled](#) China as a “reference point of greatness”; he posed for pictures with Chinese parish priests (both official and clandestine) who had been brought to Rome to promote dialogue—Zen accused the pontiff of being naive about Beijing, a criminal regime in the cardinal’s eyes.

Zen described the pope’s drive for reconciliation as “simply ridiculous” and any agreement with China as “totally unacceptable.” He considers concessions to the Communist Party treasonous: any deal, he writes, would amount to the abandonment of the clandestine faithful who refuse to capitulate to the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, which Beijing established in 1957 as an independent national church purposely cut off from Rome. Beijing then introduced state-appointed bishops, which are against Catholic canon law. From the government’s perspective, the underground church was a criminal network and an illegal political threat.

Blurred lines

Yet Zen’s is a minority view. In reality, far more ambiguity exists between China’s official and unofficial church, and the separation itself harms Catholicism’s integrity in the view of most church experts, among them Reverend Lawrence Murphy, president emeritus of Seton Hall University, and the Beijing-based journalist Francesco Sisci, former Italian cultural attaché in China. Indeed, the Church of Rome infiltrated the Patriotic Catholic Association early on. Files at the Vatican are full of letters from Chinese bishops handpicked by the state seeking a papal blessing—which most of them received. Of approximately 110 bishops in China, about 70 were jointly approved by Rome and Beijing, some 30 were endorsed solely by the Holy See, and seven were state-appointed bishops whose status is now under Vatican review. At the local level, priests from the two communities increasingly collaborate. Jerom Heyndrickx, a missionary priest who has worked in China since 1980 and brought a [“mixed” delegation](#) of Chinese priests to Rome on a pilgrimage last April, explained, “Some were from the underground church, most were official, but there’s not the slightest difference between the two in terms of faithfulness to Rome.”

One example demonstrates the complexity: Following some 20 years in jail and another ten years in reeducation camps or under house arrest in northern China for being a Rome-educated priest who resisted party authority, Shanghai Jesuit Aloysius Jin Luxian agreed to direct Shanghai’s seminary when the government reopened it in 1982. (Churches and seminaries were closed during the Cultural Revolution, a policy reversed by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping.) Jin had concluded that it was more important to preserve the church and serve its people than wage a hopeless battle against the regime underground. Asked to become an auxiliary bishop for the state in 1985, Jin unsuccessfully sought Vatican approval.

Under Jin’s leadership, the Shanghai diocese revived scores of churches, trained hundreds of priests, started a Catholic publishing company, founded a retreat center, and attracted new faithful. Jin rose to national prominence in both of China’s main state-sanctioned Catholic entities, the Patriotic Catholic Association and the Catholic bishops’ conference, and even gained approval for parishioners to pray for the pope during Mass.

He shaped the Chinese-language liturgy that is now standard throughout the country. (Mass was typically said in Latin into the 1980s.) By 2005, it was revealed that the Vatican had quietly blessed his episcopal ordination, although he was formally described in paperwork as an auxiliary bishop, ranked below Shanghai's [underground bishop](#), a faithful priest but an ineffective administrator considering he lived under house arrest. (By canon law, a diocese can have only one chief bishop at a time.) When Jin died four years ago, he was widely [eulogized](#) by the church as an exceptional Catholic leader.

The fluidity between registered and unofficial Catholicism was also due, in part, to migration. The underground church has its deepest roots in rural areas, where it traces its history back to the seventeenth century, when Jesuit missionaries and converts spread the faith through kinship networks, including indigenous merchants baptized in the Teaching of the Lord of Heaven (as Christianity was called) while living in Beijing and Guangzhou, who brought the faith back to family villages. In contemporary China, as believers moved to urban job centers, they often left underground communities and joined registered churches out of convenience more than choosing sides. Today, according to priests who work there, most Catholic growth is in the official church, not among traditional underground Catholic families. A Freedom House [report](#) released last month estimates six million Catholics worship in registered churches and another six million in unregistered ones, where Mass is held in workplaces, at homes, outdoors, or even in borrowed official churches.

The second reason Cardinal Zen's critique is not widely held is that the Vatican's approach is pragmatic. In China today, an ad hoc process for appointing priests has emerged: those under consideration for episcopal appointment by the government seek approval from the Vatican, thus managing to be jointly selected without any official mandate instructing them to do so. But as long as Beijing and Rome allow informal arrangements to structure their relationship, the faithful themselves are left confused, and anomalies and outrages are routine.

Tong reflects the attitude of Francis when he describes Hong Kong's church as a bridge between universal Catholicism and the mainland church. Like the other members of Francis' "A-team" on China—including Vatican Secretary of State Pietro Parolin, credited with breakthroughs in Vatican under Pope Benedict, and Archbishop [Claudio Celli](#), a China desk officer under Pope John Paul II—Tong supports reconciliation between the official and unofficial Catholic communities in China based on decades of personal experience with the Vatican's trials, errors, and largely unheralded achievements on the mainland.

Writing in an online diocese publication last July, Tong explained the nature of Sino-Vatican dialogue: its religious goal is restoration of unity between the universal and the local church, its pastoral goal is gaining legal protection for the clandestine church, and the diplomatic goal is a "[mutually acceptable plan](#)" to overcome past discord. In Tong's narrative, discord is the product of misunderstanding: the Chinese government did not trust that the church was uninterested in politics. To achieve noninterference in each other's domains, Tong explained, the church would avoid engagement with Chinese political authority while the regime would defer to the church's need to manage internal administration.

The Universal Church

The church's primary concern in China is ecclesiastic, not political. That's a crucial difference. There can be no functioning universal church where Catholics are cut off from Rome or divided into camps. That's why the Vatican's vision of religious life, for 35 years, has turned on reconciliation. Rome's working theory is that as long as the pope has a formal hand in perpetuating apostolic succession through episcopal appointments, all other problems can be solved. The Patriotic Catholic Association can become an instrument of communication and charity; the bishops' conference will be one among many others around the world.

In theory, the Vatican could accept a tacit agreement with Beijing to this effect. A [2006 cable](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06VATICAN185_a.html) (https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06VATICAN185_a.html) released by WikiLeaks finds Celli suggesting just such an option to the U.S. ambassador. But since the goal today is less power sharing and more normalizing domestic church life, transparency and publication of an accord is the only way to erase the painful, dysfunctional rift. In fact, according to Father John Worthley, an American professor of public administration who has taught in China since the early 1980s—and is, incidentally, a Catholic priest—the main work on the mainland for the last six months has been reuniting official and unofficial church communities: "The situation for the Church in China is like when the Berlin Wall fell. People have been getting ready for years, so when it happens, it will happen fast."

The Chinese government has long insisted that Catholicism conform to Chinese culture. This agreement signals that Xi considers the church in China to be sufficiently patriotic that it raises no threat. In fact, there is already ample evidence of this. [Jinde Charities](http://eng.jinde.org/), founded in 1997 by a priest as the first Catholic nongovernmental organization (<http://eng.jinde.org/>), now provides disaster relief, care for the elderly, AIDS prevention, and educational programs across the country, with government approval. And a Chinese "third order" of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity founded in Hebei Province three years ago now has some 20,000 lay followers. It seems the work begun in 1601 by the Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci, a Ming imperial court adviser, has reached fruition.

Beijing outlaws Islamic veil and beards in Muslim province

China has banned the wearing of veils and long beards in public in a crackdown against religious extremism.

By Katie Mansfield

Express (01.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2omIBpi> - The new restrictions in the far western region of Xinjiang include a range of measures including outlawing religious marriage ceremonies and "using the name of Halal to meddle in the secular life of others".

New legislation, passed by Xinjiang lawmakers and published on the region's official news website, widens existing rules and comes into effect today.

Xinjiang is home to the Muslim Uighur people who say they face discrimination.

Hundreds of people have died in recent years in the region with Beijing blaming the unrest on Islamist militants and separatists.

Rights groups say the violence is in response to government crackdowns which could push some Uighurs to extremism.

According to Reuters, workers in public spaces like stations and airports will be required to "dissuade" those who fully cover their bodies, including veiling their faces, from entering, and to report them to the police, the rules state.

It will be banned to "reject or refuse radio, television and other public facilities and services", marrying using religious rather than legal procedures and "using the name of Halal to meddle in the secular life of others".

The rules say: "Parents should use good moral conduct to influence their children, educate them to revere science, pursue culture, uphold ethnic unity and refuse and oppose extremism."

The document also bans not allowing children to attend regular school, not abiding by family planning policies, deliberately damaging legal documents and "abnormal growing of beards and naming of children to exaggerate religious fervour".

A number of bans on select "extremist behaviours" had previously been introduced in some places in Xinjiang, including stopping people with head scarves, veils and long beards from boarding buses in at least one city.

The new rules expand the list and apply them to the whole region.

China officially guarantees freedom of religion, but authorities have issued a series of measures in the past few years to tackle what it sees as a rise in religious extremism.

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

While Uighurs have traditionally practiced a more relaxed form of Islam, the popularity of veils for women in particular has grown in recent years in what experts say is an expression of opposition to Chinese controls.

After a period of relative calm, there has been a rise in violence in recent months in the Xinjiang's southern Uighur heartland and a large increase in security.

Chinese President Xi Jinping called for a "great wall of iron" to safeguard Xinjiang during the annual meeting of China's parliament earlier this month.

Chinese Christians imprisoned for selling religious devotional books

By Julie Brown Patton

The Gospel Herald Ministries (10.03.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2mONrHi> - Five Christian leaders in China's northeastern Liaoning province, who were arrested for allegedly purchasing and selling Christian books, now received prison sentences for doing so.

Four women and one man, all members of Chaoguang Church, also known as Chaoguang Village Christian Gathering Place, were sentenced for allegedly buying and selling

"officially forbidden Christian devotional books," according to ChinaAid sources. ChinaAid is an international nonprofit whose employees expose abuses of persecuted Christians and promotes religious freedom, human rights and rule of law in China.

Pastor Li Dongzhe, and his wife, Piao Shunnan, received seven years each with a fine of \$14,500, according to China Aid. The church's accountant, Zhao Chunxia, and a secretary, Li Yuan, were given five years each and fined \$10,200. Another member, Shi Jinyan, was sentenced to three years with a fine of \$7,300.

Most of the defendants belong to a Korean ethnic minority group that resides within China, according to ChinaAid. They were arrested last June.

Johan Oeyangen, on social media, invited others to imagine this same development happening in a democratic nation.

Ingrid Jarrett Tater asked online: "If America is a Christian country, why are we doing business with China?"

Chaoguang Church is an officially registered church within China's government-run Protestant church system, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. The church also received a fine of \$29,000 associated with the allegedly offense of these devotional books. Despite the church's registered status, the courts declared the Christians illegally conducted business because they intended to make a profit while selling Christian literature.

Following the conviction, Chaoguang Church has closed down, reports ChinaAid.

Convicting registered church members is perceived as a change from prior actions, in that charges such as "illegal business operations" were typically levied against attendees of unregistered house churches to limit their freedom.

"Christian convicts of crimes like 'illegal business operations' and 'participating in cults' are [usually] brought against house church members," said Ren Quanniu, a lawyer who often works on such cases. "[The government] simply comes up with random legal excuses to detain them. I've heard of a similar case, in which the believers were arrested because of illegally publishing religious materials."

ChinaAid was founded in 2002 after the announcement of death sentences for five Chinese house church leaders. Some of the group's first actions involved a letter-writing campaign, and sending trained human rights lawyers to defend those being persecuted. In the end, the five death sentences of these leaders were overturned.

As atheist China warms to the Vatican, religious persecution 'intensifies'

By James Griffiths and Matt Rivers

CNN (28.02.2017) - <http://cnn.it/2m6eGkr> - From an altar in a dingy backyard four hours from Beijing, Paul Dong is conducting mass.

He's also breaking the law. Dong and his parishioners are among millions of illegal Christians worshiping in officially atheist China.

According to a new report from US-based NGO Freedom House, persecution of Chinese Christians and other faith groups has "intensified" in recent years.

"Combining both violent and nonviolent methods, the (Communist) Party's policies are designed to curb the rapid growth of religious communities and eliminate certain beliefs and practices," the report said.

Its release comes amid hot speculation over whether the Vatican and Beijing will strike a potentially historic deal on the ordination of Chinese bishops, ending decades of frosty ties.

Such a deal would not be welcomed by Dong and many of his fellow illegal worshippers.

"Jesus said one person cannot serve two gods, now the Vatican is willing to serve God and the Communist Party," he said.

Persecution

Since President Xi Jinping came to power in late 2012, Freedom House said, the scale of religious oppression has increased at all levels of society, despite widespread resistance from believers of all stripes.

"The scale and severity of controls over religion, and the trajectory of both growing persecution and pushback, are affecting Chinese society and politics far beyond the realm of religious policy alone," researcher Sarah Cook said in a statement.

Religious practice in China is tightly controlled by the government, with the five recognized faiths -- Chinese Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism and Taoism -- supervised by official organizations such as the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement or the Buddhist Association of China.

"Places of worship are registered, religious leaders are monitored, theological content is managed, and annual festivals or pilgrimages like the Muslim Hajj are organized under official auspices," Freedom House said.

The report documented particularly onerous restrictions on Muslims -- who have been prevented or discouraged from fasting for Ramadan or wearing veils -- and Tibetan Buddhists. The Dalai Lama is regarded as a separatist by Beijing, and sharing his teachings has landed some Buddhists in jail, according to Tibetan human rights groups.

Falun Gong -- a banned spiritual movement Beijing regards as a "cult" -- has been subject to an intense crackdown for decades. Freedom House said the number of prisoners of conscience in China is in the "tens of thousands," with the majority of those being Falun Gong practitioners.

"Many spiritual activities practiced freely around the world -- from fasting during Ramadan to praying with one's children or performing Falun Gong meditation exercises -- are restricted and can be harshly punished in China," Cook said.

Christian crackdown

There are an estimated 72 to 92 million Christians in China, the second largest faith group behind Chinese Buddhists.

The majority of those are unaffiliated with the officially-sanctioned churches. More than half of Protestants are unregistered, according to Freedom House.

According to US-based Christian NGO ChinaAid, this leaves them vulnerable to oppression and abuse. In Zhejiang province alone, the group has documented the forced

demolition of more than 20 Protestant and Catholic churches, and the removal of more than 1,000 crosses in recent years.

Hundreds of Christians have also been detained or arrested attempting to resist those demolitions, ChinaAid said.

As the larger of the Christian denominations in China, Freedom House said Protestants had been "particularly affected by cross-removal and church-demolition campaigns, punishment of state-sanctioned leaders, and the arrest of human rights lawyers who take up Christians' cases."

However, Ian Johnson, author of new book "The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao," said the focus on the cross removal misses the big picture.

"I'd say that the most important point is that virtually none of these churches have been closed," he said in a piece for CNN Opinion.

"All continue to have worshipers and services just like before. In addition, the campaign never spread beyond the one province. Some pessimists see it as a precursor for a campaign that might spread nationally, but so far that hasn't happened and there is no indication it will."

Warming ties

As the situation has worsened for Protestants, relations between the Vatican and Beijing are at their strongest level in years.

Pope Francis has expressed his desire to visit China, and reports last year suggested the two sides were moving closer to a deal on the ordination of bishops, long a sticking point.

Beijing does not recognize the authority of the Pope, and requires bishops to be appointed by local Chinese Catholic bodies. The Vatican refuses to permit bishops ordained without papal approval to take part in liturgical acts and has excommunicated Chinese bishops who do so.

Asked about the potential for a deal, the Vatican would not comment, with a spokesman saying it was a "work in progress."

Father Simon Zhu, a Chinese priest in an officially-sanctioned church, told CNN "we pray for this normalization between Rome and Beijing."

But other leading Catholics in the region have been less supportive. Retired Cardinal Joseph Zen, former Bishop of Hong Kong, told CNN such a deal risked "selling out" underground Catholics and undermining the authority of the Pope.

Zen said that the situation for Catholics in China has worsened in recent years as the Vatican has sought compromise with Beijing.

"We are afraid it's going to be a bad deal," he said. "There's no reason to hope the Communists will change. They already have very tight control of the above ground church, their hope is to have the underground church under their control as well."

Any deal by which the Beijing-dominated Chinese bishops conference nominated candidates for the Pope to appoint would be unacceptable, Zen said: "How can an atheist government choose bishops for us?"

But he suggested that the reverse method, in which bishops put forward by the Pope could be vetoed by Beijing, offers a potential way forward.

"If they veto (the candidate) it is still up to the Pope to suggest another name," he said. "The initiative always comes from the Pope."

Flawed policy

While the Freedom House report documents widespread abuse of religious practitioners, Cook said Beijing's continued difficulty in controlling the spread of religion shows the "remarkable failure" of its policy.

"It would appear that in the longterm battle for China's spirit, an unreformed Communist Party will ultimately lose," she said.

US Senator Marco Rubio, chair of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, told CNN that "despite Beijing's recent crackdown on human rights lawyers and civil society, and the deteriorating situation for religious freedom, faith communities continue to grow in China."

Millions of Chinese -- particularly Christians -- practice their religion outside the control of the Party, worshiping in private or at so-called "house churches" like Paul Dong's.

Dong ministers to hundreds of underground Catholics, some of whom were dismissive of the officially sanctioned body.

"I would never join the patriotic church," one elderly parishioner told CNN. "They aren't real churches."

Police summon Wenzhou pastor after his release on bail

China Aid (17.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2moRWbU> - The pastor of a house church in China's coastal Zhejiang province feared he may be re-arrested when he responded to a police summons on the morning of Feb. 3.

After Huang Yizi, the pastor of Fengwo Church, was released on bail a year ago, he expressed his concern that he would be taken into custody again, saying, "Please pray for me. I will not return if they want me to do something that contradicts the law, the truth, my belief, or my conscience. If I am really sentenced during the [Lunar] New Year, sisters and brothers [in Christ], please believe that I always have a clear conscience toward God and my fellow men."

At 5 p.m. that day, Huang updated his friends, saying he had been allowed to return home, but the issue the police wanted to address had not yet been solved. However, he did not discuss the contents of their conversation and asked for prayers.

In an interview with a China Aid reporter on Feb. 3, Huang's wife said he had received the summons the night before, and that the police had been summoning him like this since he was bailed out of prison last year. She and several other local Christians believe that he was ordered to come to the police station because Feb. 5 marked the one-year anniversary of his release. According to Chinese law, if he is found not in violation of bail rules, he may remain free, but, if officials determine that he has violated those precepts, he may subject to arrest.

More than two years ago, officials targeted Salvation Church's cross as a government-

endorsed beautification campaign raked across Zhejiang, pegging church buildings and crosses for demolition. When more than 600 of them arrived on the site on July 21, 2014, however, a wall of Christians met them, and conflict erupted as authorities tried to break through. More than 50 church members were injured, with 14 requiring medical attention. To protest this mistreatment, Huang and a group of Christians visited the local government. 10 days later, he was apprehended and charged with "gathering a crowd to assault a state agency." Later, the charge was altered to "gathering a crowd to disturb public order." He was tried on March 24, 2015, and sentenced to one year in prison, and released on Aug. 1, 2015.

On Sept. 12, 2015, just six weeks after his release, authorities unexpectedly took Huang back into police custody on trumped up charges of "stealing, spying on, buying or illegally providing State secrets for institutions, organizations and people outside the country." He was denied permission to see his family and meet with a lawyer, and officials even denied relatives the opportunity to send him necessities, such as money and clothes.

He was released on bail on Feb. 5, 2016.

China Aid reports abuses, such as those experienced by Huang, in order to stand in solidarity with persecuted Christians and promote religious freedom, human rights, and rule of law.

China expels 32 South Korea missionaries amid missile defense tension

Reuters (11.02.2017) - <http://reut.rs/2kQWkz6> - China has expelled 32 South Korean Christian missionaries, a Korean government official said on Saturday, amid diplomatic tension between the two countries over the planned deployment of a U.S. missile defense system in the South.

The 32 were based in China's northeastern Yanji region near the border with North Korea, many of whom had worked there more than a decade, South Korean media have reported.

South Korea's foreign ministry said on Friday it briefed Christian groups on the case of the missionaries, adding that they were expelled in January.

The ministry advised the groups on the importance of complying with the laws and customs of the areas where they work, it said.

On Saturday, a South Korean missionary in Seoul who insisted on anonymity told Reuters that four people, including a Korean missionary and a Korean-American pastor, were apprehended by Chinese police in a Yanji hotel on Feb. 9.

The South Korean official who talked about the 32 expulsions confirmed that one Korean man, whom he did not identify, had been arrested in China for possible immigration violations.

"We will provide consular services for him as needed," the official said, without giving details.

The official did not comment on whether three other people had been detained.

RETALIATION?

In South Korea, China is widely believed to be retaliating against Seoul's plan to host the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system of the U.S. military, against the threat of the missile attack from North Korea.

But there was no indication of a direct link between the expulsions and tension over THAAD, said the official.

"There was no official explanation from China," he said. "There is no confirmation that it is related to THAAD."

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

The number of Korean missionaries working in China might top 1,000, South Korean media say. Most are in the northeast, and many help defectors flee North Korea and travel to third countries, including the South.

THAAD's radar is capable of penetrating Chinese territory. Beijing has objected to the planned deployment, saying it will destabilize the regional balance of security, threaten China's security and do nothing to ease tension on the Korean peninsula.

Many South Koreans believe Beijing is retaliating against THAAD, with measures against some companies and cancellations of performances by Korean artists.

On Wednesday, South Korea's Lotte Group said Chinese authorities had halted construction at a multi-billion dollar real estate project after a fire inspection.

(Reporting by Jack Kim and Ju-min Park; Editing by Richard Borsuk)

Five Chinese religious refugees denied political asylum and threatened with deportation back to China

Open letter to the South Korean authorities

HRWF (08.02.2017) - *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (Brussels) is asking the South Korean authorities to urgently grant political asylum to five Chinese citizens who have been persecuted because of their religious beliefs in China:

Cao Yi

Wang Jingjing

Wang Tingting

Xia Yaowen

Wang Dongqing

They have recently been ordered by the Seoul Southern Immigration Office to sign their Departure Order(출국명령서). Here is their story:

In July 2013, **Cao Yi (Spiritual name: Sister Ming Liang)** applied to the South Korean Immigration Office for refugee status, but the immigration office denied her request, and decided to not recognize her refugee status (난민불인정결정추소). Disagreeing with their refusal, she lodged an appeal to the South Korean Ministry of Justice, hoping to be granted a permit of stay for humanitarian reasons, a request which was also rejected. Soon afterwards, she appealed yet again to the court and for a third time, her request

was turned down, which means that she could neither be granted refugee status nor remain in South Korea legally. As a result, she may be deported back to China. The Chinese police had planned to arrest her in July 2013 but did not manage to execute the arrest for she had fled to South Korea before the police arrived at her home.

Chinese police will surely arrest and persecute her if she is sent back to China. Her Alien Registration Card expires on 9 February 2017, in the mean time she planned to seek legal help and advice to avoid being deported. Unexpectedly, on 25 November 2016, the Seoul Southern Immigration Office withdrew her Alien Registration Card and urged her to sign the Departure Order, which forces her to leave South Korea within thirty days. When she applied to the South Korean Ministry of Justice for the second time, her case was heard and she was issued the Receipt of Refugee Status Application on 16 December 2016. However, the South Korean Immigration Office failed to grant her G-1 visa and failed to extend the normal permit of stay as according to the Refugee Act. A clerk wrote on her Departure Order with his handwritten signature reading "Pending Deportation (출국기한유예기간) 2017.3.23"

Her Departure Order expires on 23 March 2017. As claimed by the immigration office, she can still apply to the immigration office to extend her Departure Order on the afternoon of the 21st or 22nd March. If she is turned down, she will have to leave South Korea immediately, which divests her of her time and rights to seek legal remedy.

Wang Jingjing (Spiritual name: Sister Xi Yue) fled to South Korea and applied to the immigration office for her refugee status in August 2014. On 9 January 2015, she received the notice of non-recognition of refugee status from South Korean Immigration Office. She lodged an appeal to the Ministry of Justice and applied to the Commission on Legal Empowerment for an administrative trial. On 25 February 2016, she received a notice of rejection decision from the Ministry of Justice. On 10 May 2016, the Commission on Legal Empowerment refused her request for the administrative trial, stating in the notice that she can lodge an appeal to the court within 90 days from the date when she was notified. On 3 August 2016, she lodged an appeal to the court, requesting that the South Korean Immigration Office withdraws the decision of non-recognition of refugee status. On 25 August 2016, the court scheduled the hearing on her case. The court judged that her appeal had exceeded the given period of 90 days from the date of notification, and rejected her appeal according to "the applicant can lodge an appeal to the court within 90 days from the date when she was notified of being rejected". The court failed to proceed her case as a real-entity one but regardless went through the procedure of the hearing outwardly. Xi Yue clarified that she had effectively lodged an appeal before 7 August 2016, according to the notification of the decision of administrative trial, and that therefore it did not exceed the required submission period. The judge then replied that, according to the South Korean law, the applicant could make a choice between lodging a disagreement and applying for an administrative trial after receiving the notification of a decision of non-recognition of refugee status. This was the first time Xi Yue heard that these two options were mutually exclusive options. Being a foreigner, she does not speak Korean. She had no knowledge of any Korean laws, and could not conduct conversations with Korean people, making it impossible to seek legal help during this time. The Immigration Office, the Ministry of Justice, and the court all failed to perform their obligation to inform the refugee status applicants of the proper procedures.

After facing such difficulties, 24-year-old Xi Yue feels sad and helpless. Her Alien Registration Card was due to expire on 28 February 2017, but the South Korean Immigration Office withdrew the card on 25 November 2016, forcing her to sign the Departure Order, ordering her to leave South Korea within thirty days. On 13 December 2016, she applied for refugee status for a second time with the South Korean Ministry of Justice. Like Ming Liang's experience, the immigration office failed to issue Xi Yue's Alien Registration Card and to extend her regular permit of stay. They signed "Pending Deportation 2017.3.23" on her Departure Order in handwriting. Xi Yue has one final chance to apply for an extension on her Departure Order from the immigration office, which must be done on the afternoon of 21 or 22 March. If her application is denied, she will have to leave South Korea immediately.

In August 2014, **Wang Tingting** and **Xia Yaowen (Spiritual names: Chun Zhen and Gao Ge)** fled to South Korea to seek asylum. They were followed by **Wang Dongqing (Spiritual name: Jiao Tuo)** in November 2014. After their applications for refugee status were overruled, they lodged disagreements against the rejection decision to the Ministry of Justice, and applied to the Commission on Legal Empowerment for the administrative trial. These appeal applications were once again overruled and the Commission on Legal Empowerment refused their requests for an administrative trial. Like Xi Yue's experience, when the three siblings lodged appeals to the court, they did not know that their appeals were not within the required period of 90 days against the rejection decision. They thought it was effective as long as they lodged their appeals for the administrative trial within required 90 days.

Human Rights Without Frontiers asks the South Korean authorities to grant these individuals political asylum if they have not committed criminal activities and to examine the cases of other Chinese citizens who are in the same situation in South Korea.

Best regards,

Human Rights Without Frontiers

Protestant church destroyed in Henan

AsiaNews (01.02.2017) - A Protestant church was destroyed last Friday morning, 27 January, in Henan province.

A bulldozer tore down half of the four-storey building pulverising many facilities whilst Christians were remained locked in an office space inside.

Intruders hired by the authorities forcibly entered the Dali Christian Church, a government-recognised Three-Self (Protestant) congregation, carrying clubs.

They locked a church elder, named Ding, the church's temporary director, and several other Christians in the reception office, confiscated their cell phones, and threw away their SIM cards.

No one was allowed to enter the church, and the authorities forbade pictures.

The intruders then smashed and looted church property, and a front loader tore down

about half of the building, destroying many facilities.

This event has sparked fears that the church and cross demolitions, which were part of a ["beautification" campaign led by the authorities in Zhejiang province](#) and targeted many Three-Self churches, will soon erupt into a nationwide endemic of abuse against government churches.

Prominent pastor sentenced to two-and-a-half years after a year in detention

China Aid (05.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2itS0cB> - Yang Hua, a house church pastor who has been detained since Dec. 9, 2015, was sentenced to two years and six months in prison by a court in China's central Guizhou province today.

Yang Hua, the common pseudonym of Li Guozhi, was accused of "divulging state secrets." He was originally detained during a raid on his church, Huoshi Church, when he tried to stop police from confiscating a hard drive. The prosecution appointed by the government reportedly tortured him in prison, but were not removed from his case, despite Yang's lawyers filing a lawsuit against them.

"This is nothing but purely barbaric religious persecution," said Bob Fu, president and founder of China Aid. "We urge President Obama and President-Elect Trump to unequivocally condemn this brutal act."

China Aid reports on cases of religious persecution and human rights abuse, such as the detention and trial of Yang Hua, in order to expose the Chinese government's mistreatment of Christians and other Chinese citizens.
