

# China: 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. 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.

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## **CHINA: 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.

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## **UZBEKISTAN: Uzbek dissident released after 18 years in prison**

Reuters (22 February 2017) – <http://reut.rs/2mlJg5P> – Uzbek dissident Muhammad Bekjanov, one of the world's longest-jailed journalists, was released from prison on Wednesday after serving 18 years in prison, his relatives and a local rights group said.

Bekjanov, 63, a former editor of the opposition newspaper Erk, was sentenced to 15 years in prison in 1999 on charges of publishing and distributing a banned newspaper, participating in a banned political protest, and plotting a coup.

He had always denied the charges, which rights groups branded as politically motivate.

“Having mixed feelings today,” his daughter Aygul Bekjan, who lives in the United States, wrote on her Facebook page. “I’m so happy to tell everyone that my father is out of prison, but at the same time I’m so mad for the fact that he lost 18 years of his life for nothing!”

Bekjanov's brother, Muhammad Salih, the leader of the Erk party, was a presidential candidate in 1991 and has lived in exile since 1993. In 1999 he was convicted in absentia on terrorism charges, which he denied.

Bekjanov's term was reduced so that he could be set free in 2012 but prison authorities then extended his sentence by five years for having broken unspecified prison rules.

"Muhammad Bekjanov's term ended yesterday and today he was released from jail," Abdurahmon Tashanov, an activist of the Ezgulik rights group told Reuters.

"There had been worries that he could have his term prolonged again as he was put in solitary confinement and barred from visitors in December," Tashanov said.

Bekjanov could not be reached for comment on Wednesday. His release followed that of another dissident, Samandar Kukanov, who was set free last November after serving 22 years in prison.

Uzbek President Islam Karimov died in September after ruling the Central Asian nation of 32 million people with an iron fist for almost 27 years.

His successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has overseen the release of some of Karimov's jailed foes and amnestied several less prominent political prisoners. But analysts expect no significant changes in Uzbekistan's restrictive political environment.

(Reporting by Olzhas Auyezov; Editing by Alison Williams)

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