

Table of Contents

- ***Religious sect sues Chinese official in Taiwan court***
- ***Fast-growing Christian churches crushed in China***
- ***Chinese pastor sentenced to 15 years in prison***
- ***China sentences five more Christian leaders***
- ***China house church leaders sentenced***
- ***China releases Uyghur church leader from prison***
- ***Six Protestant clergymen arrested in Shanghai, Biblical theme park planned in Liaoning***
- ***Parsippany man says his daughter-in-law's only crime is Falun Gong activism Eugene Paik***
- ***Worship site demolished, pastors arrested in China***
- ***Mgr. James Lin Xili, underground bishop of Wenzhou, dies***
- ***Beijing Public Security officers seize house church***
- ***Threats continue against pastor of Liangren Church***
- ***Secret CPC Directive calls for the dismantling of six house churches in Beijing***
- ***Falun Gong practitioner home after China ordeal***
- ***Three lawyers arrested for defending the rights of Falun Gong members***
- ***Buddhism thrives as China relaxes religious policy***
- ***Chinese authorities release Sichuan house church leaders***
- ***China's 10-year campaign to crush Falun Gong drives movement underground***
- ***Vatican China envoy to get tough with Beijing***
- ***Chinese bookstore owner sentenced to three years in prison***
- ***Seventh Day Adventists growing in China***
- ***China cited for religious rights abuses***
- ***Authorities trying to keep secret arrests and sentences of Tibetan monks***
- ***China still presses crusade against Falun Gong***
- ***Detained Uyghur Christian in China taken to hospital***
- ***Protestant clergyman arrested again in Beijing***
- ***China mounting obstacles to dialogue***
- ***China's absence from European Parliament hearing slams the door in Tibetans' face***
- ***Dalai Lama rival steps into spotlight***
- ***China cracks down in Muslim West***
- ***Persecution in China as Vatican meeting on China opens***

- ***Police arrest underground Zhengding bishop Jia Zhiguo***
- ***China turns to Buddhism to calm Tibet, Taiwan tensions***
- ***The fifth encounter between Christianity and China: Only persevering in dialogue can lead to success***
- ***China prepares for post-Dalai Lama era***
- ***China arrests monks after protest over missing lama***
- ***Tibetan monk 'shot' while on fire***
- ***Underground bishop of Xiwanzi released after two and a half years in prison***
- ***Tortured Christian lawyer arrested as officials deny abuses***
- ***Chinese banknotes with "hidden" Falun Gong messages***
- ***Officials in China grapple with spread of Christianity***
- ***Cult watchers reconsider***
- ***Beijing does not recognize domestic churches, and persecutes them***
- ***51 Christians detained in Xinjiang: one young mother sentenced***

Religious sect sues Chinese official in Taiwan court

DPA

EarthTimes (15.12.2009) / HRWF (16.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Buddhist meditation group Falun Gong filed a criminal complaint with a local court Tuesday against a visiting Chinese official, accusing him of persecuting the sect. The complaint against Xu Chunguang, former Communist Party secretary-general of Henan province, was filed in Taiwan's High Court by Falun Gong spokesman Chang Ching-hsi and lawyer Teresa Chu.

Xu, party chief of Henan from 1999-2008, arrived in Taiwan Monday for a week-long visit as head of a provincial trade delegation.

"Xu was deeply involved in the persecution of Falun Gong members. We demand the court investigate, arrest and prosecute him while he is in Taiwan," Chu told reporters.

Falun Gong members in the United States filed a lawsuit against Xu at a San Francisco court in 2007, she said.

The sect has filed suits in 11 countries, accusing the Chinese officials of torturing Falun Gong practitioners and taking organs from them for medical transplants.

It is also pushing Taiwan to enact laws against genocide, torture and hate crimes.

"When these laws are enacted or revised, Taiwan can deny entry to Chinese officials who have persecuted Falun Gong members, and prosecute them if they have entered Taiwan," Chu said.

Falun Gong was founded in China by Li Hongzhi in 1992 as a meditation group. China banned it in 1999, triggering protests by sect members, which resulted in crackdown by authorities.

China accused the group fomenting social unrest. Li, now living in exile in the United States, insists that it only preaches meditation.

Fast-growing Christian churches crushed in China

Christopher Bodeen

AP (10.12.2009) / HRWF (14.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Towering eight stories over wheat fields, the Golden Lamp Church was built to serve nearly 50,000 worshippers in the gritty heart of China's coal country.

But that was before hundreds of police and hired thugs descended on the mega-church, smashing doors and windows, seizing Bibles and sending dozens of worshippers to hospitals with serious injuries, members and activists say.

Today, the church's co-pastors are in jail. The gates to the church complex in the northern province of Shanxi are locked and a police armored personnel vehicle sits outside.

The closure of what may be China's first mega-church is the most visible sign that the communist government is determined to rein in the rapid spread of Christianity, with a crackdown in recent months that church leaders call the harshest in years.

Authorities describe the actions against churches as stemming from land disputes, but the congregations under attack are among the most successful in China's growing "house church" movement, which rejects the state-controlled church in favor of liturgical independence and a more passionate, evangelical outlook.

While the Chinese constitution guarantees freedom of religion, Christians are required to worship in churches run by state-controlled organizations: The Three-Self Patriotic Movement for Protestants and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association for Roman Catholics.

But more and more Chinese are opting to choose their own churches, despite them being technically illegal and subject to police harassment. Christians worshipping in China's independent churches are believed to number upwards of 60 million, compared to about 20 million who worship in the state church, according to numbers provided by scholars and church activists.

House churches have been around for decades, but their growth has accelerated in recent decades, producing larger and larger congregations that are far more conspicuous than the small groups of friends and neighbors that used to worship in private homes, giving the movement its name.

Their expansion and growing influence has deeply unsettled China's rulers, always suspicious of any independent social group that could challenge communist authority. Fears that Tibetan Buddhism and Islam promote separatism among Tibetans and Uighurs also drive restrictions on those religions.

"They are so afraid of rallying points developing for gathering of elements of civil society," said Daniel Bays, who follows Chinese Christianity at Calvin College, a religious school in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

While house churches have faced varying degrees of repression depending on the region and political climate, the latest crackdown appears to specifically target the largest congregations.

Authorities want to dismantle large churches "before they grow out of total control," said Bob Fu, a former Communist Party researcher in Beijing who now heads the China Aid Association, a Texas-based church monitoring group.

At least two other large churches have recently faced similar crackdowns.

In Beijing in October, authorities locked parishioners of Shouwang house church out of the space they had rented to worship in. In Shanghai, the Wangbang congregation faced a similar lockout. Both congregations had grown to more than 1,000 members.

Shouwang and Wangbang church leaders have not been detained, but activists fear further arrests are coming.

In a brief phone conversation, Wangbang's pastor Cui Quan said worship continued in small groups while he fought to have their lease restored. He declined to give other details.

Christianity was long associated with foreign interference in traditionally Buddhist and Taoist China, and came under heavy attack after the 1949 Communist revolution.

The most onerous restrictions were lifted after the death of communist leader Mao Zedong in 1976. Although Christians still account for a less than 10 percent of China's 1.3 billion people, recent years have seen rapid growth in house churches in both cities and rural areas.

Adding to official concerns about their numbers, house-church Christians also emphasize missionary work - illegal in China - and some have even operated an underground network to help smuggle North Korean refugees and Uighurs out of China in defiance of the security forces.

The Golden Lamp Church was built by husband and wife evangelists Wang Xiaoguang and Yang Rongli as a permanent home for their followers, whose numbers had soared to more than 50,000.

The couple, administrators at the provincial teachers' college, had been preaching in the region around the city of Linfen since 1992, establishing a network of three dozen communities meeting in improvised spaces such as factory dormitories and greenhouses. They also attracted thousands to tent revival meetings.

According to Bob Fu, Shanxi authorities grumbled as the church was being built last year, but did not try to stop work and offered few, if any, signs that an impending crackdown. On a rainy Sunday in mid-September, some 400 police officers and hired thugs descended on more than a dozen church properties around Linfen, smashing doors and windows and hauling off computers, Bibles, and church funds, according to accounts posted online by church members and their allies.

Those accounts said worshippers who resisted were beaten, with dozens hospitalized with serious injuries.

Wang, Yang, and three other church leaders were convicted on Nov. 25 on charges including illegally occupying agricultural land and assembling a crowd to disrupt traffic. Yang, 51, received a seven-year sentence, while Wang, 56, and the others received terms of three to four years. Five others were sentenced without trial to two years in a labor camp.

Other church leaders have gone into hiding.

Courts, police and government officials in Linfen refused to comment on the claims of violence and persecution. A local Communist Party spokesman said only that the case centered on the mega-church's lack of planning approval.

"We have always supported and allowed everybody to believe in religion. But the church itself is an illegally constructed building," said the spokesman, who would give only his surname, Wang.

A lawyer for Wang and Yang, Li Fangping, said the church had applied for permits to build the church from the local religious affairs bureau and the land use authority, but received no reply.

Almost three months after the crackdown, people in and around Linfen refuse to discuss the church, and police vehicles remain parked on virtually every corner of the neighborhood where the Golden Lamp is located.

Chinese pastor sentenced to 15 years in prison

Harsh punishment for house church leader based on apparently far-fetched charge

Compass Direct (08.12.2009) / HRWF (09.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Chinese authorities have quietly sentenced Uyghur Christian Alimjan Yimit (Alimujiang Yimiti in Chinese) to 15 years in prison on the apparently contrived charge of "providing state secrets to overseas organizations," according to China Aid Association (CAA).

The charge against the 36-year-old house church leader, held for more than two years at Kashgar Detention Center in China's troubled Xinjiang region, was apparently based on interviews he granted to media outside of China, according to his lawyer, Li Dunyong.

"The 15-year sentence is far more severe than I originally expected," Li said in a CAA press statement released yesterday. "It is the maximum penalty for this charge of 'divulging state secrets,' which requires Alimujiang's actions to be defined as having 'caused irreparable national grave damage.'"

CAA President Bob Fu said Alimjan's sentence was the most severe for a house church leader in nearly decade.

"The whole world should be appalled at this injustice against innocent Christian leader Alimujiang," Fu said in the CAA statement. "We call upon the U.N. and people of conscience throughout the world to strongly protest to the Chinese government for this severe case of religious persecution."

CAA reported that officials had read the verdict to Alimjan while he was incarcerated on Oct. 27. Li confirmed to CAA that he had filed an appeal.

Initially the Bureau of State Security of Kashgar detained Alimjan on "suspicions of harming national security" on Jan. 11, 2008, according to CAA. As such charges are generally leveled against those considered to be an enemy of the state, Alimjan's family feared he would be subjected to capital punishment. Local sources have said that Alimjan, a convert from Islam in an area teeming with separatist tensions, loves and supports the Chinese government.

"As a loyal Chinese citizen and business entrepreneur, Alimujiang has held to high standards, paying his taxes faithfully and avoiding a common local custom of paying bribes for business favors," Fu said in a previous CAA statement. "He has also done his best to assimilate into Chinese culture, making the unusual decision to send his children to a Chinese language school in a predominantly Uyghur area."

Friends of Alimjan have said he simply wanted the freedom to quietly express his faith, a right guaranteed to him in the Chinese constitution, according to CAA. Not only is it illegal for him to own a Uyghur Bible, according to the advocacy organization, but he is also prohibited from attending services at the government-controlled Three Self Church in the area because the Xinjiang constitution contradicts China's constitution. He is also prohibited from praying with foreign Christians.

On Feb. 20, 2008 the initial charges against him were changed to "inciting secession" and leaking state secrets. Court officials returned Alimjan's case to state prosecutors in May 2008, citing lack of evidence.

This year he was secretly tried again on July 28, only on the second charge. Previously, attorney Li had petitioned for and been granted permission to meet with his client on April 21. Witnesses had seen police and a prison doctor escorting Alimjan to hospital on March 30, and Compass sources said Alimjan had been beaten in prison, although it was not clear who beat him or why.

When Li questioned him, Alimjan indicated that he was not allowed to speak about his health.

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled his arrest and detention to be arbitrary and in violation of international law.

"The whole case is about religious faith issues, which are being used against Alimujiang for his conversion from Islam to Christianity by biased law enforcement agents, prosecutors and the court," said attorney Li. "The key for this case was the flawed 'Certificate for the Evidence.' In both form and content, the certificate was questionable. It even had no signature by the verifier at the bureau, which violates Chinese law."

Sources said there appears to be a concerted effort to shut down the leadership of the Uyghur church in a restive region where authorities fear anything they cannot control. The region of ethnic Uyghurs has come under a government crackdown the past two years as long-simmering tensions erupted.

Disputes over ownership of Xinjiang's land and rich mineral resources have led to resentment between Uyghurs – native to Xinjiang – and Han Chinese. Religious differences are also an issue, with a vast majority of Uyghurs practicing Islam, while most Chinese are officially atheists or follow Buddhism or syncretistic folk religions. Only a handful of China's estimated 10 million Uyghurs are known to be Christians.

China sentences five more Christian leaders

Arbitrary administrative decision sends church leaders to re-education labor camp

Compass Direct (03.12.2009) / HRWF (09.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Bypassing the court system, China arbitrarily sentenced five more leaders of the Fushan Church in Linfen City, Shanxi Province, on Monday (Nov. 30), this time to re-education labor camps for two years, according to China Aid Association (CAA).

A Chinese court last week sentenced five house church leaders to three to seven years in prison after they were arrested en route to Beijing to file a complaint about an attack on their church, according to the advocacy organization. The five leaders sentenced to labor camps this week were accused of "gathering people to disturb the public order" after they organized a prayer rally of 1,000 people the day after military police and others attacked their church members and building on Sept. 13.

In what CAA termed "an arbitrary administrative sentence by the Public Security Bureau enacted so the leaders would not be 'required' to go through the court and prosecution system," China delivered the verdicts to church leaders Li Shuangping, Yang Hongzhen, Yang Caizhen (wife of Pastor Yang Xuan, who was sentenced to three years of prison on Nov. 25), Gao Qin (also known as Gao Fuqin), and Zhao Guoai.

"Yang Caizhen was seen being beaten severely during an interrogation," CAA said in a press statement. "Having had one of her front teeth knocked out during a beating, and fasting and praying during her detention, Ms. Yang is reported to look very fragile."

The church leaders, the latter four women, were arrested on Nov. 11. They had helped to organize a prayer rally after the Sept. 13 attack on the Fushan Church branch congregation in Linfen, when some 400 uniformed police and civilians bearing shovels, batons, bricks, iron hooks and other weapons had beaten members of the church who were sleeping at the nearly finished factory building used as a worship site.

With several Fushan County officials involved in the attack, more than 30 Christians were seriously injured among the 100 Christians who were hurt, CAA reported. According to the Epoch Times, a church member's relative obtained a license to build the shoe factory and was allowing the group to meet there, as the church was growing too large to meet in homes and the building could hold up to 400 people.

As Chinese authorities had kept the families of Gao Qin and Zhao Guoai under tight surveillance, CAA relied on church sources to confirm their sentences to labor camp. The organization said family members had confirmed the sentences of the other three.

"Linfen house church Christians continue to be monitored by Chinese military police, including neighboring Golden Lampstand Church (Jin Dongtai) in Linfen City," CAA stated. The organization said authorities violated Chinese law by refusing to provide family members of the prisoners with copies of documents notifying them of the sentences.

All 10 of the Fushan Church leaders plan to appeal their sentences, according to CAA.

"To arbitrarily send five innocent citizens to labor camps is in direct violation against the international human rights covenants and norms the Chinese government has signed and even ratified," said CAA President Bob Fu.

The five pastors previously sentenced were arrested on Sept. 25 without a warrant, according to CAA. Yang Rongli was sent to prison for seven years for "illegally occupying farming land" and "disturbing transportation order by gathering masses."

She and four other pastors were sentenced on Wednesday (Nov. 25) at the People's Court of Raodu district, Linfen City, Shanxi Province. Yang's husband, Wang Xiaoguang, was handed a sentence of three years on the charge of "illegally occupying farming land." Cui Jiaying was sentenced to four and half years, and Yang Xuan to three and half years, on the same charge; Zhang Huamei received four years of prison for "disturbing transportation order by gathering masses."

The pastors were arrested by Shanxi Province officers of the Public Security Bureau (PSB). Fu characterized their trial as a farce, saying the case demonstrated a deteriorating state of religious freedom in China.

Yang Rongli and Wang Xiaoguang had led the Fushan Church, part of a 50,000-strong house church network in Linfen and the surrounding villages, for more than 30 years.

The Beijing PSB has misrepresented the demolition and attack on the Linfen branch church as a response to a "violent uprising," Fu said.

China house church leaders sentenced

Christopher Bodeen

AP (26.11.2009) / HRWF (02.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A court in northern China has sentenced five leaders of an unauthorized Protestant church to prison terms of up to seven years on charges including illegal assembly, rights groups reported Thursday.

The sentences are among the harshest in recent years for members of so-called "house churches" - congregations that refuse to register and accept the authority of the government's Religious Affairs Bureau.

Arrests stemmed from a Sept. 13 raid by police and hired security guards on sunrise services held in a dormitory building by the 50,000-member Linfen Fushan Church in Linfen, northern Shanxi province, rights groups and the advocacy Web site Boxun.com reported.

Those sentenced late Wednesday by the Linfen Intermediate Court included the church's pastor Wang Xiaoguang and his wife Yang Rongli, who both received the maximum sentence. Yang was apparently targeted for her efforts to petition local authorities on Wang's behalf, Boxun said. Others were given sentences of between three and four-and-a-half-years, it said.

The trial was called at the last minute and the court permitted only one family member of each defendant to attend, the reports said. Local authorities had previously refused to allow lawyers to meet with the accused.

The reports said the five were convicted on two charges: "illegal land occupation" and "assembling a crowd to disrupt public order." No other details were given. Monitoring groups frequently cite such charges as evidence of government harassment of nonofficial churches.

Yang had been detained the day after the raid while carrying a protest to the Shanxi provincial government offices in the capital of Taiyuan, reports said. Another 10 people were detained over the following days, although it was not immediately clear whether they had been released or would also face trial.

Calls to several departments of the Linfen Intermediate Court rang unanswered on Thursday. A man who answered at Fushan police headquarters hung up after a reporter identified himself and calls to other local government departments went unanswered.

According to the U.S.-based China Aid Association, local authorities had earlier chosen not to prosecute church leaders under harsh anti-cult legislation that could have brought more severe sentences. That seemed to indicate they would continue to allow the church to exist, although reports said police continued to be posted outside church offices.

The association said the sentences were the toughest against unofficial church leaders since Zhang Rongliang received 7.5 years in 2006. It said lawyers for the five had been shown only a fraction of the documents submitted in the case and claimed the verdicts had been predetermined - a common accusation in politically sensitive cases.

"We strongly condemn this unjust sentence based on trumped-up charges. This case clearly shows the seriously deteriorating situation of religious persecution in China," association President Bob Fu said in a statement.

Officially, China's communist government requires all Protestants to worship in the non-denominational Three-Self Patriotic Movement, while Catholics must meet in the Patriotic Association. Both are beholden to the Religious Affairs bureau, while the degree of tolerance for unregistered churches varies from location to location.

The number of Christians in China is estimated to be about 50 million to 130 million.

China releases Uyghur church leader from prison

Osman Imin freed after two years; concerns remain over incarcerated Alimjan Yimit

Compass Direct (24.11.2009) / HRWF (25.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A Uyghur Christian in China's troubled Xinjiang region was released last week after serving two years in a labor camp for alleged "illegal proselytizing" and "leaking state secrets," according to Compass sources.

House church leader Osman Imin (Wusiman Yaming in Chinese) was freed on Wednesday (Nov. 18), sources said. Authorities had called for a 10-15 year prison sentence for Osman but significantly reduced the term following international media attention.

An outspoken leader of the Uyghur church in the northwestern region of China, Osman was first arrested in 2004 and kept at a detention center in Hotan, southern Xinjiang. Local sources said his arrest was almost certainly related to his church work.

There he was chained to a metal bed in winter and frequently beaten while interrogated. Osman was released on bail on Nov. 18, 2004, but bail was canceled in October 2006. On July 26, 2007, he was again placed under supervised house arrest and finally detained by police on Nov. 19 of that year on the charge of "revealing state secrets."

Authorities denied him access to a lawyer, and in June 2008 a court rejected his appeal without explanation.

Authorities eventually moved him to the labor camp outside Kashgar. While in prison Osman was forced to work 12 to 15 hours a day, and his health quickly deteriorated. He was reportedly suffering malnutrition throughout his confinement.

Osman and his wife Nurgul have two young daughters.

Still in arbitrary detention in the region is another Uyghur Christian, Alimjan Yimit (Alimujiang Yimiti in Chinese). Officials initially closed the foreign-owned business Alimjan worked for in September 2007 and accused him of using it as a cover for "preaching Christianity." He was then detained in January 2008 on charges of endangering state security and was formally arrested on Feb. 20, 2008 on charges of "inciting secession" and leaking state secrets.

Court officials returned Alimjan's case to state prosecutors in May 2008, citing lack of evidence. Last May 21, government sources told Alimjan's mother that the Public Security Bureau (PSB) in Kashgar planned to quietly sentence him to three years of re-education through labor, thereby circumventing the court system.

Under Chinese law the PSB, which originally filed the case against Alimjan, may authorize such sentences without approval from the court or other state agencies.

Court authorities have returned Alimjan's case to state prosecutors, citing lack of evidence for charges of "leaking state secrets" and "inciting secession." Family, friends and work colleagues have insisted that Alimjan is a loyal citizen with no access to state secrets, and that his arrest was due largely to his Christian faith and association with foreign Christians.

In Xinjiang's politically charged environment, Alimjan's family and friends fear he could face execution if he were wrongly linked with alleged Uyghur separatists.

Sources said there appears to be a concerted effort to shut down the leadership of the Uyghur church in a restive region where authorities fear anything they cannot control. The region of ethnic Uyghurs has come under a government crackdown the past two years as long-simmering tensions erupted.

Disputes over ownership of Xinjiang's land and rich mineral resources have led to resentment between Uyghurs – native to Xinjiang – and Han Chinese. Religious differences are also an issue, with a vast majority of Uyghurs practicing Islam, while most Chinese are officially atheists or follow Buddhism or syncretistic folk religions. Only a handful of China's estimated 10 million Uyghurs are known to be Christians.

As part of authorities' apparent effort to clamp down on Christianity, they have disbarred several lawyers involved in the defense of Uyghur Christians, including Alimjan's attorney, Li Dunyong. He was effectively disbarred at the end of May when Chinese authorities turned down an annual application to renew his law license.

Zhang Kai, another Beijing lawyer who had defended Alimjan, suffered the same fate.

Authorities failed to renew licenses for at least 15 other lawyers who had defended civil rights cases, religious and ethnic minorities and political dissidents, according to watch group Human Rights in China.

Six Protestant clergymen arrested in Shanghai, Biblical theme park planned in Liaoning

AsiaNews (23.11.2009) / HRWF (25.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The latest adventure of Leung Moon-lam, owner of a Hong Kong-based business empire who fled the mainland in the early 1970s, is a theme park combining the Bible and Chinese culture. Yet, religious repression in the mainland continues unabated. In Shanghai, police detained six Christian leaders from a banned underground church in an apparent bid to stop an "unauthorised" outdoor service yesterday.

Leoung's theme park should be built in Liaoning province. A Christian convert in 1996, the entrepreneur wants to build 'Harmony World' in which Christianity and Chinese traditional culture are combined. Other Christian entrepreneurs are involved in the 2.3 km2 project salted to go up in Tieling.

Given the amount of money involved, the central government might actually be interested. However, it would hardly be a sign of openness towards religion. Yesterday's raid in Shanghai shows that Beijing's official policy towards religion is the same.

According to Cui Quan, senior pastor at the Shanghai Wanbang Church, police detained six Christian clergymen for interrogation but in fact, the real purpose was to prevent a public function planned for the afternoon.

The unregistered church, which has about 1,000 members, was closed by the local district Civil Affairs Bureau two weeks ago because it deemed its activities illegal. The congregation still planned to meet at the park but the authorities detained the clergymen to block the service.

"We have nothing to fear, but we feel the religious environment in China has got a lot worse recently," Rev Cui Quan said. "For those of us who are firm in our beliefs, our faith will only grow stronger, but for those who are not so strong, this is a huge blow."

After the arrest, some 500 people managed to worship there yesterday morning anyway.

The church has launched an official complaint against its closure, arguing that freedom of assembly and religion are protected under the constitution.

This is not the first time the Wanbang church has been targeted by the authorities. In February, police and State Administration for Religious Affairs officials ordered it to cancel a seminar, and when the church defied the order, the church's landlord was pressured to terminate the rental agreement.

This month, Beijing-based Shouwang Church, with about 700 members, was forced to worship at a park in a snowstorm after being evicted from its rented premises.

Parsippany man says his daughter-in-law's only crime is Falun Gong activism Eugene Paik

The Star-Ledger (16.11.2009) / HRWF (18.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - What 80-year-old John Shen knows is this: His son is dead and his daughter-in-law is imprisoned because of their activism with the Falun Gong.

In the nearly eight years since they were arrested in China, Shen has labored to free Luo Fang from a Chinese jail cell while he grapples with his son's death.

Shen says Luo and his son Shen Lizhi are some of the thousands of prisoners who have been arrested over the past decade for being a practitioner of Falun Gong, a lifestyle that has its roots in an ancient Chinese tradition but is considered a cult by Chinese authorities.

"We are a peaceful people. We've done nothing wrong," said Shen, also a Falun Gong follower, through an interpreter.

Now, he says, Luo's salvation rests on the U.S. Department of the State and President Barack Obama, who is in China this week.

The struggle to free Luo has been a long and frustrating one, a fight that's been slowed by what Shen believed was politics between the two nations.

The paperwork on Luo is sparse, though she was included in a 2005 United Nations civil and political rights report that described the reports of her imprisonment as "reliable and credible."

China started its crackdown on the Falun Gong in 1999, when the movement began to spread across the country and beyond its boundaries.

The Chinese Consulate in New York City last week declined to comment for this article, but the website for the Chinese embassy described the sect as an "anti-humanity, anti-society and anti-science cult."

According to the Chinese government, thousands of practitioners have died because they refused medical treatment for illnesses and committed self-mutilation or suicide, orders that it claims come from its charismatic leader. Also, the Web site states, "innocent people" have been killed by practitioners.

Rick Ross, a Trenton-based expert on cults, supports that view.

"In my opinion, the Falun Gong is a destructive cult," Ross said. He called some of their claims "highly exaggerated and made-up stories."

Shen said those charges aren't true and maintained that his story is very real. Repeated at street fairs and to elected officials, it's a tale he's told to anyone willing to listen.

He's managed to get the support of Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-11th Dist.) and Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.), who have each written letters to China about the treatment of Falun Gong prisoners.

In 2002, authorities arrested Luo, then 31, and Shen Lizhi, then 33, in Chengdu after they were reportedly caught on a bus with Falun Gong fliers. They were taken to a Chengdu detention center, according to the United Nations report.

The couple, who ran an English-language test tutoring business, had been active in promoting the Falun Gong and dispelling misconceptions about it, John Shen said.

Shen Lizhi _ his youngest son _ had only been jailed a few months before he died from "general organ failure," according to the Global Mission to Rescue Persecuted Falun Gong Practitioners, a nonprofit group that lobbies for the release of Falun Gong prisoners.

The doctor's report on the death did not reveal any clues about what caused the organ failure, he said. Li Li, the executive director of the Falun Gong rescue group, said her organization was unable to learn how he died.

Stricken with grief, John Shen then focused his attention on his imprisoned daughter-in-law, who was reportedly sentenced in August 2003 to 12 years in prison.

"It was an unusually harsh sentence, even for Falun Gong practitioners," said Henry Wang, Shen's friend and fellow Falun Gong believer.

Li said any attempts to see Luo have been rebuffed because she refuses to wear prison garb.

But she said that sources in China have spoken of the horrific treatment of Luo.

For Ross, who has not investigated the Luo case, the dearth of documented evidence is a red flag. He said the rumors of torture are consistent with "exaggerated" claims that he believes are made by Falun Gong practitioners.

Sophie Richardson, Asia advocacy director for the nonprofit Human Rights Watch, disagreed.

"Arbitrary detention is a serious problem in China," she said. "It can be very difficult to document what happens to the practitioners."

Worship site demolished, pastors arrested in China

Officials put on alert to use military force against potential "unrest" by churches

By Edward Ross

Compass Direct (07.10.2009) / HRWF (08.10.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Following a mob attack on a church in northeastern China and the demolition of their worship site last month, the government put officials on alert to use military force against churches to quell potential "unrest," according to a leading advocacy group.

Citing reliable government sources, China Aid Association (CAA) reported that the central government on Sept. 26-27 ordered officials in "all relevant government agencies" to prepare to use military force against Christians who might react to the attack on a Fushan Church branch congregation in Linfen city, Shanxi Province. In the wee hours of Sept. 13 some 400 uniformed police and civilians bearing shovels, batons, bricks, iron hooks and other weapons beat members of the church who were sleeping at the nearly finished factory building used as a worship site.

With several Fushan County officials involved in the attack, dozens of Christians were seriously injured among the more than 100 who were hurt, CAA reported. According to the Epoch Times, a church member's relative obtained a license to build the shoe factory and was allowing the group to meet there, as the church was growing too large to meet in homes and the building could hold up to 400 people.

On Sept. 25 Shanxi Province officers of the Public Security Bureau (PSB) detained nine Fushan Church leaders on their way to Beijing to protest the attack, and the next day authorities placed state military police inside and around the main Fushan Church building in Linfen city, the advocacy organization said.

"To have military police occupy a peaceful church is an unprecedented, tragic development in 60 years of PRC [People's Republic of China] history, which itself shows

the reality of today's situation regarding religious freedom in China," China Aid President Bob Fu said in a statement.

Some 5,000 of the 50,000-member Linfen House Church network had worshipped weekly at the main facility, where the central government stationed police to prevent them from entering or holding services.

"Military police now guard the building and the surrounding areas around the clock," Fu said. "More than 30 daughter churches in nearby townships have been prohibited from gathering to worship in their churches and homes."

Among the nine Fushan Church leaders arrested without a warrant and held in a secret location was Pastor Yang Rongli, according to the CAA.

Other church leaders and members have been placed under house arrest and are now under constant surveillance, Fu said, adding that local authorities confiscated all church computers, TVs and other valuables as "illegal materials."

The Beijing PSB has labeled the demolition and attack on the Linfen branch church as a response to a "violent uprising," Fu said. The branch congregation had gathered at the Good News Cloth Shoe Factory, a building still under construction in Fushan County, when the government-led mob attacked and took money, Bibles, clothes and cell phones, among other items, he said.

Fushan PSB officials met with church leaders on Sept. 19 and offered 1.4 million yen (US\$20,540) for reparations in exchange for the church not constructing a building for religious purposes, Fu said.

"Under pressure from the central government, the leading Fushan PSB officer expressed a desire to make amends for the agency's corporate actions, with the goal of preventing any turmoil that could potentially mar the 60th anniversary National Day celebrations," Fu said in the statement. "Angered by the brutal treatment, but willing to cooperate, the six [church] members raised their concerns, including the continued critical conditions of several hospitalized victims and the destruction of 17 buildings on the factory compound."

The Christians reached a verbal agreement that the Fushan PSB would pay the reparations fee in exchange for the church not constructing a building, but Fu said continued arrests and state military presence at the main church site confirm the negotiations were insincere, a tactic to delay actions against the central government.

Pastor Arrested

In Beijing, the crackdown ahead of the Oct. 1 National Day included the arrest of a pastor known internationally as a house church rights defender.

PSB and State Security agents from Fengtai district in Beijing seized Pastor Hua Huiqi of Tent-Making Ministry on Sept. 17. That evening his wife, Ju Mei, received a telephone call from him saying PSB agents had forced him into a car on the highway. She received another call a half hour later saying he had been taken to an unknown location before the phone went dead.

That night a Beijing PSB officer, Ding Xu, went to his home to pick up clothes for him and refused to answer his wife's questions, according to CAA. The director of the PSB's Domestic Security Protection Squad later told CAA that Hua was still in custody but declined to reveal his condition or whereabouts.

"Hua has been repeatedly arrested, beaten, and interrogated by PSB officials within the last two years, and his family has sacrificed their safety for the lawful defense of human rights," Fu said in a statement. "Hua's mother, Shuang Shuying, was released only months ago from her two-year imprisonment for her rights defense work."

Mgr. James Lin Xili, underground bishop of Wenzhou, dies

By James Wang

AsiaNews (06.10.2009) / HRWF (08.10.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Mgr James Lin Xili, bishop of Wenzhou (Zhejiang) died on 4 October at the age of 91. For his faith he spent 16 years in labour camps and in recent years, though ill and immobilised in bed, he was constantly under police surveillance.

The bishop's body was transported 45 km from Wenzhou to Yueqing, where, on 10 October the funeral will be held. It is not yet clear whether his body will be draped in the vestments of a bishop or whether the Church will celebrate the solemn funeral for an ordained priest. Bishop Lin has never been recognized as a bishop by the Religious Affairs Bureau. In 2004, on the occasion of his 60th priestly ordination, they banned him from wearing the insignia of bishops.

According to the agency UCAN, the police closed a Catholic site of Wenzhou, guilty of having published the obituary on Msgr. Lin and messages of condolence from the faithful. The local government was afraid that the bishop, whose condition worsened in late September, may have been buried on October 1, risking a rally of thousands of people on a day on which security measures were at their maximum level, given celebrations for the 60 years of the Republic of China.

Many believers of Wenzhou migrants in China and abroad, have already planned to take part in the funeral of the deceased prelate.

Born October 19, 1918 in Yueqing, Msgr. Lin Xili was ordained priest in 1944 and graduated from the Catholic University in Beijing, the Fu Ren, in 1948. Returned to his diocese of Ningbo, he worked in pastoral care at the beginning of the Communist persecution.

In '55 he was arrested for "counterrevolutionary crimes." For 16 years he was imprisoned in a forced labour camp, working as a cobbler. Released in '71, after Mao's death he recommenced in full his pastoral work restoring many churches destroyed in the Cultural Revolution and forming one of the most vibrant Catholic communities in China. In '92 he was ordained bishop of Wenzhou in secret and his community continued to flourish, today counting over 100 thousand faithful.

The imbalance between the underground and official believers faithful (several tens of thousands) has led to tensions in the past between the two communities, but in recent times, and especially after the Letter of Benedict XVI, the two communities have become increasingly reconciled. This reconciliation was facilitated in some way by the arrest of Mgr. Lin Xili in 1999, who since 2003 was forced to live under house arrest at the official Bishop's church of Wenzhou. Since then he has had to fight against his disease (Alzheimer) which led to him frequently losing consciousness. Police continued to keep him under close surveillance until the very end.

Beijing Public Security officers seize house church

ChinaAid (21.09.2009) / HRWF (22.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - On September 17 (Beijing time), Hua Huiqi, Pastor of the Tent-Making Ministry, was seized by Public Security and State Security agents from Fengtai District in Beijing. After learning what happened to his church and his vocational school, Pastor Hua was returning home from "forced vacation" in Shanxi, when five PSB officers immediately surrounded his apartment home.

Around 5:00 PM he was invited to go out to dinner at a restaurant, to talk about the last Sunday's incident at the vocational school. About half an hour later, his wife, evangelist Ju Mei, received a phone call from Hua. Secretly from his cell phone, Hua told her that he had been forced into a PSB car on the highway. Before 6:00 PM, Hua called his wife again, and said he was taken to an unknown location by a group of PSB officers. The phone went dead, and the family members lost contact with him.

At approximately 10:20 PM, a Beijing PSB officer named Ding Xu went to Hua's home to pick up some clothes for Hua. When Ju Mei asked him what had happened to her husband, and whether he was dead or alive, Officer Ding Xu refused to answer. He reportedly pointed to his police badge and said, "Don't you know who I am? I have no obligation to answer your questions!"

ChinaAid President Bob Fu called the Director of the Domestic Security Protection Squad of PSB of Fengtai District of Beijing this morning, at 7:00 AM CST, inquiring about Pastor Hua's status. The Director confirmed that Hua is still in their custody but refused to reveal his condition and whereabouts.

Hua's 79-year old mother, wife and daughter fear for Hua's safety; they identified one of the police officers who seized Hua as one of men who beat Hua severely in the crackdown leading up to June 4 of this year. Pastor Hua has been repeatedly arrested, beaten, and interrogated by PSB officials within the last two years, and his family has sacrificed their safety for the lawful defense of human rights. Hua's mother Shuang Shuying was released only months ago from her two-year imprisonment for her rights defense work.

ChinaAid calls for the lawful release of Pastor Hua Huiqi, and denounces the illegal actions of the Beijing Public Security Bureau. We urge you to continue praying for the Tent-making Ministry church members, and for Pastor Hua and his family.

To urge the Chinese government to release Hua Huiqi, contact the Chinese Embassy:

Ambassador Zhou Wenzhong
3505 International Place, NW, Washington, D.C. 20008
Tel: (202) 495-2000
Fax: (202) 588-9760

NOTE: If you are a citizen of another country, please click here to find the contact information of the Chinese embassy in your own nation

[http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zwjg/2490/.](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zwjg/2490/)

Threats continue against pastor of Liangren Church

ChinaAid (21.09.2009) / HRWF (22.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - At noon on September 3, 2009, the administrative reconsideration office in Zhuhai notified Pastor Wang Dao of Guangzhou Liangren Church that the Guanzhou court had ruled in favor of his application for reconsideration on behalf of the church, and requested he come to the office to pick up the award. At 5:00 PM, four public security

officials came to his home in Donghai Garden Community, and requested that he join them for an investigation in Luoxi Police station. They claimed they were from Guangzhou Bureau of Public Security, but when Pastor Wang demanded they show him the warrant of investigation, they could not furnish one. Instead, they instructed him to "lighten up," claiming they just "wanted to talk." The security officials then took Pastor Wang to the residential police office and "conversed" with him for two hours.

According to Pastor Wang, the men were primarily interested in the details surrounding his signing the Chinese Christians Statement on 20th Anniversary of the Tiananmen Massacre, released earlier in June. They further threatened him: as his "friends" they urged him to think about wife and children, "You will have to consider your future and security." Pastor Wang refused to succumb to the intimidation; he thanked them for their concern, but asserted, "Since I follow Jesus and am determined to be a servant of God, I have prepared myself for those consequences." The officials did not release him until 8:00 PM that night.

The next day, a government official from Zhuhai called and woke Pastor Wang at 8:00 AM, informing him that the staff needed to reschedule the time for Pastor Wang to pick up the award to the church. She said she would be out of the office and would contact him with a new time in few days. One week later, Wang's attorney received her note, stating the court had postponed the ruling on the appeal until late September. After two previous rejections, this final delay ironically pushed the appeal back beyond the two-month time limit to legally apply for an administrative reconsideration.

At noon on September 15, 2009, Pastor Wang learned that the Guangzhou police had driven 700 miles to his brother's home in Guanxi to investigate Wang's residential identity card, the ID required for all Chinese citizens. Pastor Wang perceives this to be the latest act of revenge against him for irritating the Guangzhou PSB with his appeals on behalf of the church.

The upcoming 60th Anniversary of the PRC has led to an increasing persecution to house churches in Guangzhou and other provinces. Since December 14, 2008, Guangzhou Liangren Church has been repeatedly attacked and banned by the Bureau of Religious Affairs in Guangzhou. In recent months, the court has rejected two appeals for the reinstatement of the church. Though this latest strategy to appeal through administrative reconsideration process was suppressed, Pastor Wang continues to remain faithful to protecting his rights and the church's rights under the law.

Secret CPC Directive calls for the dismantling of six house churches in Beijing

China Aid (25.08.2009) / HRWF (26.08.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - On August 25, 2009, ChinaAid learned the Chinese government recently issued a secret directive calling the government agencies to dismantle at least six major house churches before the end of August. ChinaAid believes these actions have been taken in preparation for the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the CPC's rule in China.

Reliable sources told ChinaAid that the Beijing Huajie Plaza received an order from the PSB to terminate its rental contract with the Beijing Shouwang house church. One of the largest house churches in the area, Beijing Shouwang Church has been renting two floors for their worship and Sunday school services in Huajie Plaza for a few years. The church has over 1,000 church members, and most of them are intellectuals from universities. This is the most recent action against Beijing Shouwang Church since government

officials forcibly shut down their church website on April 13, 2009, and raided the church on May 11, 2008.

Other house churches in Beijing recently received similar pressure to stop church gatherings. This is believed to be the first step taken by the Chinese government to crack down on the house churches in Beijing.

In mid-August, three government officials, including members of the PSB and RAB, disrupted a baptism service held at a river in the Beijing suburbs by one house church from Haidian district. Outside Beijing, a TSPM church in Zhejiang was also raided, and more than 2 tons of Sunday school materials were confiscated. A house church training school in Shandong province was also raided and banned by the authorities.

President Bob Fu believes, "the upcoming 60th anniversary of the CPC is not cause for trampling on rights of peaceful citizens gathering in accordance with their right to religious freedom. ChinaAid urges the Chinese government to revoke the secret directive, which is contrary to international covenants signed by the CPC, to acknowledge the positive societal influence of these house churches, and to allow these churches to meet freely throughout the anniversary period."

ChinaAid urges Christians around the world to speak out on behalf of these believers, to urge that their freedoms not be thwarted.

Contact the Chinese Embassy with your concerns;
Ambassador Zhou Wenzhong
3505 International Place, NW, Washington, D.C. 20008
Tel: (202) 495-2000
Fax: (202) 588-9760

NOTE: If you are a citizen of another country, please click here to find the contact information of the Chinese embassy in your own nation
<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zwjg/2490/>.

Falun Gong practitioner home after China ordeal

By Loa Iok-sin

Taipei Times (08.15.2009) / HRWF (09.15.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Taiwanese Falun Gong practitioner Shao Yuhua (邵玉華), who was arrested in China late last month, was released and returned to Taiwan on Thursday.

Shao, a former Chinese national who moved to Taiwan 11 years ago after marrying a Taiwanese and who now holds Republic of China (ROC) citizenship, traveled to China last month with her daughter to visit her family in Nanyang, Henan Province.

On the morning of July 31, several Chinese state security agents arrested her at her sister's house, where she was staying.

After receiving the news from Shao's family in China, her husband, Cheng Shu-ta (鄭書達), along with other Falun Gong practitioners in Taiwan, launched efforts to rescue Shao by using both their own connections in China and asking for help from government agencies in charge of cross-strait affairs, including the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) and the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF).

"We asked the SEF to contact [China's] Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait a day after [the arrest] happened, and the Ministry of Justice also made rescue efforts

through channels created by the cross-strait mutual judicial assistance agreement," MAC Vice-Chairman Liu Teh-hsun (劉德勳) told the Taipei Times.

"Fortunately, the mission was successful and Shao was released and returned to Taiwan [on Thursday] afternoon," Liu said.

Falun Gong practitioner and attorney Theresa Chu (朱婉琪) said yesterday that Shao's arrest and the seven-day detention that followed was because she was a Falun Gong practitioner.

"[Shao told me] that she was tortured in detention — Chinese state security agents tried to keep her awake all the time, forced her to write self-criticisms, tried to brainwash her and threatened to hurt her family," Chu said.

Chu said Shao's release was the result of international attention as well as strong protest from Falun Gong practitioners worldwide.

A draft outline of Shao's self-criticism — which she said was written by Chinese state security agents — that she brought back from China listed "unlawful acts" such as "distributing Falun Gong information," "providing financial support to Falun Gong activities" and "spreading and teaching Falun Gong."

It was not known whether Shao had told the Chinese law enforcement personnel that she was an ROC citizen at the time of her arrest.

The Falun Gong newspaper Epoch Times reported yesterday that Shao thanked everyone for the rescue effort as she stepped out of the airport on Thursday and urged continued efforts to save all Falun Gong practitioners in China who are suffering because of their religions beliefs.

Three lawyers arrested for defending the rights of Falun Gong members

CHRD denounces "a progressive deterioration of the situation" for lawyers who fight for human rights in China". One of the three arrested had already been sentenced in 2005 to one year of re-education through forced labour for the same reason

AsiaNews/Chrd (15.07.2009) / HRWF (15.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Chinese authorities have arrested three lawyers in north-eastern China. The root cause for the arrests, their commitment to the defence of followers of Falun Gong, a movement outlawed by Beijing. The group for the Protection of Human Rights Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) revealed the news today; they are Ruping Liu, Wang and Wang Ping Yonghang.

The arrests occurred between July 2 and 8. Renee Xia, director of international CHRD, has expressed "concern" and stressed that "these actions could signal a gradual deterioration of the situation, for lawyers who fight for human rights in China."

The arrest of Liu Ruping dates to July 2 last. He had been working in Jinan, a town in the province of Shandong and already in 2005 was sentenced to one year's imprisonment in the laogai, camps for re-education through forced labour, for his commitment to helping Falun Gong followers. The man was seized near his home by public security officers, who also ransacked his apartment. It is likely that he is being held in a prison in the city, specialized in the detention of pro-Falun Gong members and activists.

On 4 July 20 plainclothes security officers (NSU) and a group of policemen from the city of Dalian, Liaoning Province, raided the house of Wang Yonghang. Without a search warrant, the ransacked his house and beat his wife and 80 year old mother. Wang and his wife were brought to prison. The woman was released the next day, the man is still being held in prison in Dalian, but there has been no official confirmation.

The third arrest dates back to July 8. Wang Ping, a lawyer from Pingdu in Shandong province, was kidnapped by local police agents. Currently no one knows the reasons behind the arrest, but it appears likely that the motives are bound to his defence of the rights of believers of Falun Gong.

Confirming the climate of intimidation in China, in recent days the government "warned" lawyers not to take up the defence of human rights activists and demonstrators, referring in particular to the demonstrators of Urumqi. Recently, many lawyers involved in cases of political significance have been arrested, beaten and the Beijing authorities have threatened their removal from the professional role, controlled by the Communist Party of China. These include lawyers who are defending Tibetans, the followers of Falun Gong, Sichuan earthquake victims and parents of babies who died in the melamine to milk scandal.

Buddhism thrives as China relaxes religious policy

By Robert J. Saiget

AFP (07.07.2009) / HRWF (09.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Temples thrive, monks travel far and wide in search of enlightenment, the faithful fill the halls of worship -- after decades of atheist policies, Buddhism is making a huge comeback in China.

Nowhere is this revival more apparent than at Wutaishan, the most important of China's four holy mountains and home to a sprawling complex of temples, 300 kilometres (180 miles) southwest of Beijing.

"I have come to study at Wutaishan because Zen Buddhism, Han Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, all the different schools from different places, are represented here and mixed together," itinerant monk Master Shi told AFP.

"This is the Buddhist holy land. Buddhist monks and nuns from all over China want to come here to study."

Shi, sporting a shaved head and wearing a grey robe, has visited temples throughout China in search of Buddhist knowledge, repeating a pilgrimage undertaken by generations of monks before him.

Besides studying Tibetan Buddhism in Lhasa, he has visited the Hongfa Temple in Guangdong, south China, and been to the White Horse Temple -- China's oldest Buddhist place of worship -- in Henan province in the center of the country.

Interest in Buddhism has grown dramatically since the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution, a period when religion was largely banned, the clergy persecuted and many temples and monasteries destroyed.

In stark contrast to this era, during the opening and reform era of the last 30 years, the state has largely allowed religion to develop, albeit within strict parameters.

For decades, the communist-run State Administration for Religious Affairs has said there were only about 100 million religious believers in China, but state press reports have recently said that number has grown to 300 million.

In late June, Wutaishan was named a World Heritage Site by the United Nation's cultural arm UNESCO, a move expected to bring more visitors to this holy shrine that houses some of China's oldest Buddhist manuscripts.

Currently 53 temples house monks and nuns, while the ruins of more than 150 temples are scattered around hillside terraces or isolated on remote mountain tops.

The earliest temples date back to the first century when Buddhism first arrived to China from India.

"Twenty years ago, as we started recovering from the Cultural Revolution, the total number of monks here was just a few hundred," said Yi Bo, spokesman for the Wutaishan Buddhist Association.

"Since then Buddhism has not stopped developing. More and more monks have come. The numbers hit 1,000, then 2,000, then 3,000. Three years ago we hit 5,000."

At that time the government stepped in and began restricting the number of monks who could study here, he said.

Meanwhile, 2.8 million visitors came to Wutaishan in 2008, bringing in 1.4 billion yuan (206 million dollars) in tourist revenues, according to government figures. This year more than 3.1 million visitors are expected.

"The government supports us mainly with policy, but funding for our growth mainly comes from donations from the Buddhist faithful," said Miao Yi, a nun at the Buddhist Institute at the Pushou Temple, China's largest convent.

More than 600 nuns are studying in the Buddhist Institute which has received generous funding from Buddhists in Hong Kong and Taiwan, she said.

Still the government remains wary over religion and monks here refused to discuss Tibetan Buddhism or its spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, who once asked communist leaders if he could make a pilgrimage to Wutaishan's 10 Lama temples.

"We must work to support patriotism and national unity. We must embrace the leaders of the Communist Party and the socialist system," Gen Tong, a senior Buddhist leader said on the occasion of 50th anniversary of the Wutaishan Buddhist Association in late 2007.

"In the past, (the rulers) of different dynasties were all impressive emperors and were all devout Buddhists," said association spokesman Yi Bo.

If Chinese communist leaders were allowed to publicly adhere to Buddhism, he said, "for sure it would bring a huge benefit to us," he said.

Chinese authorities release Sichuan house church leaders

Christian Post (29.06.2009) / HRWF (30.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Chinese local authorities have released all 18 house church leaders arrested in Langzhong city, Sichuan province, on June 9.

ChinaAid Association said they were released due to pressure from many supporters who called the Public Security Bureau (PSB) office after seeing ChinaAid's press release.

Thirteen of the leaders were detained for 10 days before being released on June 23.

More than 30 house church leaders were gathered in Pastor Li Ming's house church in Langzhong city when the arrests took place.

Several dozen officials in six to seven police vehicles from the local Domestic Security Protection Squad surrounded the site, before arresting all 30 of the Christians and searching the house. Police released 12 leaders the same day, but detained 18.

ChinaAid and the 18 released house church leaders have expressed their gratitude towards the Christians whose prayers and phone calls led to their release.

ChinaAid and other persecution watchdogs say house churches and their leaders continue to face persecution in China, an officially communist country.

Although China allows Christians to practise their faith, it believes the state should have ultimate control over the church.

The leaders of unregistered churches, meanwhile, say only God has authority over the church and its affairs.

There are believed to be at least 40 million house church members in China.

China's 10-year campaign to crush Falun Gong drives movement underground

By Alexa Olesen

AP (20.06.2009) / HRWF (21.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Now entering its second decade, China's relentless drive to obliterate the Falun Gong spiritual sect has left a human toll ranging from the deaths of followers in custody to the self-exile of others and the beatings of their lawyers.

Saturday marks the 10th anniversary of a protest by an estimated 10,000 practitioners who stood silently around the Communist Party leadership compound in Beijing, alerting the government to the group's strength and wide appeal.

The April 25, 1999, demonstration was intended to show how Falun Gong believers had learned compassion, forbearance and tolerance, said practitioner Bu Dongwei in a telephone interview from the United States, where he fled six months ago.

But the size and discipline of those who gathered unsettled the communist leadership, ever wary of independent groups that could threaten its authority.

Two months later, the group was labeled an "evil cult" and banned, its leadership arrested, and a campaign launched to forcibly reconvert millions of believers. Anyone practicing Falun Gong or even possessing materials about it could be arrested.

Followers say the crackdown cost the lives of 3,200 practitioners, including 104 last year.

The government says some Falun Gong followers have died in detention because of hunger strikes or refusing medical help. But it denies any have been intentionally killed.

U.S.-based spokesman Levi Browde said since 1999 the group has recorded more than 87,000 cases of torture and estimates that anywhere from 200,000 to 1 million practitioners have been detained for various lengths of time.

Though less visible now that Falun Gong has been driven underground in China, the crackdown remains as vicious as ever, he said.

"The brutality continues and the systematic nature is the same and may have escalated a bit," Browde said.

At a highway off-ramp on the outskirts of Beijing, Yu Qun, a non-practitioner, reluctantly met an Associated Press reporter to show pictures and tell the story of her younger brother, Yu Zhou, a folk musician and a practitioner who died last year in police custody.

Tall and musically gifted, Yu Zhou studied French at the elite Peking University and later lived a Bohemian existence in China's capital with his wife, an artist and poet.

"Really happy, funny. He really liked people, whether they were strangers or people he knew well ... He had a gentle personality and was always thinking of other people," she said, cradling a small collection of his snapshots in her lap.

Yu, 41, and his wife were stopped, allegedly for speeding, as they drove home from a concert. Police detained the couple after finding CDs and printed material about Falun Gong in their car.

Ten days later, Yu Qun was called to the detention center's hospital. Her brother had died but authorities were unclear about the cause. More than a year later, the case remains unresolved.

Yu Zhou's wife, Xu Na, is serving a three-year sentence at a reeducation through labor facility.

The Chinese government contends Falun Gong brainwashes people into believing the practice can cure them of illness. It also alleges the movement convinced several members to self-immolate at Tiananmen Square in 2001, where a mother and her 12-year-old daughter died.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu said at a regular press briefing Thursday the movement was harmful because it caused "illness, disablement and even death of many innocent people," but she did not give specifics.

"The Falun Gong cult violates human rights by controlling people's minds," Jiang said. "We encourage the entire society to help those practitioners who have been taken in."

Falun Gong attracted millions of followers in the 1990s with its program of traditional Chinese calisthenics and philosophy drawn from Buddhism, Taoism and the often-unorthodox teachings of founder Li Hongzhi, a former government grain clerk who now

lives in hiding overseas. Organized by volunteers, the group claims to have no political agenda.

International human rights groups, the United Nations and numerous Western governments have criticized China for its crackdown, particularly its reeducation through labor, a system that allows authorities to imprison practitioners without trial.

In recent years, a handful of Chinese lawyers have begun taking Falun Gong cases. Cheng Hai, a self-trained Beijing lawyer represents Yu Zhou's wife and family, as well as six other practitioners. He says he was beaten earlier this month while trying to visit the home of another Falun Gong client.

"In China, a lot of people feel it's not worth fighting for their rights because they are so likely to fail," Cheng said. "They don't know that the big victories are won by adding up many, many small wins and actions."

Bu, the practitioner who took part in the 1999 demonstration, was sent to a labor camp for 2-1/2 years after a search of his home in 2006 turned up Falun Gong books.

In November, Bu and his young daughter boarded a plane for the United States, knowing if he stayed he would continue to be persecuted. He now lives with his wife and daughter in Los Angeles.

"I hope I can go back. I am sure I will go back soon after, you know, the Communist Party is over," he said.

Vatican China envoy to get tough with Beijing

AP (17.06.2009) / HRWF (18.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Vatican's top envoy for China says the time has come for the Holy See to get tough with Beijing and not compromise over religious freedom.

Cardinal Joseph Zen says relations are taking a "worrisome slide" and that a new phase in relations was necessary.

Zen says the Vatican shouldn't give too much importance to re-establishing diplomatic relations with Beijing because such a move could trick people into thinking there is religious freedom in China when there isn't.

Pope Benedict XVI has been reaching out to Beijing in hopes of reconciling the official, state-sanctioned church with the underground church that is loyal to Rome.

Zen spoke in an interview Tuesday with the Vatican-affiliated missionary news agency AsiaNews.

Chinese bookstore owner sentenced to three years in prison

Shi Weihua also fined nearly \$22,000; 'illegal business' printed Bibles for free distribution

By Edward Ross

Compass Direct (10.06.2009) / HRWF (11.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A Beijing court today found Christian bookstore owner Shi Weihang guilty of "illegal business operation" and sentenced him to three years in prison and a 150,000 yuan (US\$21,975) fine.

Sources said Shi's store operated legally and sold only books for which he had obtained government permission, and that his Holy Spirit Trading Co. printed Bibles and Christian literature without authorization but only for free distribution to local house churches.

The 38-year-old Shi had been released on Jan. 4, 2008 due to insufficient evidence for the same vague charge of "illegal business operation," but he was arrested again two months later, on March 19, and held virtually incommunicado. Contrary to Chinese law, authorities have denied all but a few visits from his lawyer and family, held him without charges for most of his time in jail, and initially withheld medication for his diabetes.

The court ruling appears to have allowed time that Shi has spent in jail to count toward his sentence, a source said, as his prison term was described as running from Nov. 28, 2007, when he was initially arrested, to Nov. 27, 2010.

Others in a printing company who stood trial with Shi appeared to have received similar sentences. A written judgment is expected within 15 days to allow time for an appeal to be filed, said Ray Sharpe, a friend of Shi.

"Absent an appeal, it is also possible that Shi could be allowed a sort of medical parole, due to his diabetic condition," Sharpe said. "Hopefully, he could then be allowed to stay in a hospital under a sort of house arrest."

He said that Shi did not yet know whether he would appeal, adding that the process could take up to a year.

Friends and business acquaintances of Shi have described him as a model citizen of China, saying that he has inspired them to love China by his patriotism and love for his homeland. They said he is known for selfless sacrifice on behalf of poor and disenfranchised rural Christians and minority children.

For much of his incarceration, Shi's wife Zhang Jing and their two daughters, 12-year-old Shi Jia and 8-year-old Shi En Mei, have not known where he was being held. The family has been under nearly continual surveillance, limiting their ability to make contact with people who could assist them.

Sources said Zhang has worried about her husband's condition and that she has taken on leadership duties at their church, where Public Security Bureau officials have intimidated the congregation with regular visits. Some members have left the church because of the intimidation, sources said, and Zhang is said to have suffered anxiety and stress that have led to depression.

Their two daughters have been ostracized at school for being the children of a prisoner, sources said.

Shi has lost more than 44 pounds since his second incarceration, they said, dropping to less than 130 pounds. The sources added that he has suffered from blisters because of unsanitary conditions in prison, as well as tinnitus that at times causes his ears to ring so loudly that he cannot sleep.

Chinese officials claim that the Nanjing Amity Printing Co. (Amity Press), the only government-approved Bible publisher, produces enough Bibles to meet the needs of the Chinese church, which various religious freedom organizations dispute. The groups

complain that Amity prints a large share of its Bibles for export, and those sold domestically are not available to many Christians.

Seventh Day Adventists growing in China

First historic visit of a top Adventist leader in China in 60 years

By Tristan Leavitt for Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (04.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - For the first time in 60 years a top Adventist leader has visited Seventh Day Adventist Churches in China. From May 13-19, Seventh Day Adventist President Jan Paulsen toured the People's Republic of China in a historic trip representing a recent first both for the Chinese and for Paulsen.

The trip marked Paulsen's first visit to China since becoming president of the 15.8-million-member church in 1999. China is today home to nearly 400,000 Seventh Day Adventists worshipping in 4,000 locations throughout the country, including house churches. The Adventist church in China is affiliated with the China Christian Council/Three-Self Patriotic Movement as well as with the Little Flock and the True Jesus Church, two other groups.

During his weeklong visit, Paulsen commented on the growth of the Seventh Day Adventist church in China. For instance, in the rural northeast province of Jilin, more than 20,000 members attend at least 380 congregations, many of which were started by just one church planter.

In the sub-provincial city of Shenyang, Liaoning province, which has a total population of 7 million, Adventist believers once numbering less than 50 two decades ago now total 7,000, making up two congregations. One of those, the Beiguan congregation, has nearly 3,000 members as well as the capacity to seat them, making it the city's largest Protestant church building; 2,500 of those members turned out to hear Paulsen. This congregation is additionally responsible for coordinating the ministry of 100 smaller Adventist churches, totaling another 7,000 members. Four miles away from Beiguan, the Beishi congregation shares a building with another Protestant church. When Paulsen visited it, a total of 1,200 members crowded the building, which normally only accommodates 1,000. The Beishi congregation is also responsible for overseeing the activities of 70 smaller congregations.

In the urban city of Wuxi, Jiangsu province, where the local congregation has their own building, Paulsen's address attracted several hundred. Wuxi's 35 Adventist congregations make up 10% of the Protestant Christians in the metropolitan area. Another destination of Paulsen's was Dongting, Hunan province, where an Adventist building was completed last November seating 1,200.

Altogether, Paulsen visited four Adventist congregations, the Northeast and Yangjing regional seminaries, and national and local China Christian Council/Three-Self Patriotic Movement headquarters in Shanghai, Wuxi, Shenyang and Beijing. On May 18, the last day of his trip, Paulsen also paid a visit to Guo Wei, director for Foreign Affairs of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA).

Before leaving, Paulsen noted that "many things have changed here over the past two decades which affect the presence of Christians." While the increase of freedom is difficult to compare, he stated on another occasion, many churches today "have come

together freely, worship and share their faith, share their experience as a community and experience very, very significant growth.”

China cited for religious rights abuses

Foreign Ministry spokesman asserts 'full religious freedom' despite arrests, torture

By Sarah Page

Compass Direct (08.05.2009) / HRWF (12.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A U.S. government body cited increased harassment, imprisonment and torture of members of unregistered religious groups in China last year, which a Chinese official roundly denied.

After the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) last week recommended China remain on the U.S. Department of State's list of the world's worst violators of religious freedom, a spokesman for China's Foreign Ministry said USCIRF's report was "an attempt to smear China."

"It is a fact that the Chinese government protects its citizens' freedom of religious belief according to law, and every ethnic group in any part of China enjoys full religious freedom," Ma Zhaoxu, said Tuesday (May 5) in a statement quoted by the Chinese daily Xinhua.

The commission acknowledged that "the freedom to participate in officially-sanctioned religious activity increased in many areas of the country over the past year," but noted that abuses of members of unregistered religious groups had extended to a small handful of lawyers who dared to defend them.

In at least 17 provinces, some 764 Protestant leaders and house church members were arrested in the past year, 35 of whom were sentenced to prison for a year or more, the report said. According to the state department, the total number of Protestant house church members and "underground" Catholics arrested in the past year may be in the thousands.

Religious freedom also deteriorated significantly in Uyghur Muslim and Tibetan Buddhist regions over the past year, according to the commission report. Officials have urged "stronger management" of Protestant and Catholic activity in Xinjiang, while new laws have allowed greater control over Muslim and Buddhist community leaders in both regions.

Police detained Chinese house church leader Lou Yuanqi in Xinjiang province in May 2008, charging him with "inciting separatism" and "utilizing superstition to undermine the law." A local court refused to accept his case due to insufficient evidence, but Yuanqi remained in detention until his release on bail on April 24.

Officials further restricted religious freedom in the autonomous regions of Xinjiang and Tibet during the period USCIRF covered for the report, May 2008 through April 2009. Ismail Tiliwaldi, chairman of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), urged local police and religious affairs officials to "exercise stronger management" over Protestantism and Catholicism and strictly guard against foreign infiltration and sabotage, the commission stated.

On Jan. 1, 2008, new laws gave officials in both regions greater powers to monitor the training, assembly, selection and speeches of community religious leaders. More recently,

officials have enforced bans on religious education; authorities in Tibet have warned parents to keep children away from religious ceremonies, while Xinjiang officials in February and March began a campaign to halt illegal religious schools and arrest anyone engaged in "cross-village worship."

The campaigns in Xinjiang have largely targeted Muslims, but Uyghur Christians are also affected. Unable to freely attend government-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) Protestant churches, they continue to meet in small groups in private homes, risking arrest and detention in labor camps.

House church Christian Alimjan Yimit (Alimujiang Yimiti in Chinese) remains in arbitrary detention awaiting trial, 15 months after his arrest. Officials initially closed the foreign-owned business Alimjan worked for in September 2007 and accused him of using it as a cover for "preaching Christianity." He was then detained in January 2008 on charges of endangering state security and was formally arrested on Feb. 20, 2008 on charges of "inciting secession" and leaking state secrets.

Court officials returned Alimjan's case to state prosecutors in May 2008, citing lack of evidence. The case was returned to court for consideration last October.

On April 21, attorney Li Dunyong petitioned for and was granted permission for a rare meeting with his client on April 21 after witnesses saw police and a prison doctor escorting Alimjan to hospital on March 30; Compass sources said Alimjan had been beaten in prison, although it was not clear who beat him or why. When Li questioned him, Alimjan indicated that he was not allowed to speak about his health.

Officials also continued tight surveillance of underground Catholic groups across China last year, according to USCIRF.

The official Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) insists on selecting and ordaining clergy and forbids clergy or CPA members to have contact with the Vatican or other foreign Catholic organizations, USCIRF stated. The Vatican, however, has secretly ordained as many as 90 percent of CPA bishops and priests, the commission reported.

China watchers say pressure will increase rather than decrease as China anticipates several significant political anniversaries later this year.

Rights Advocates on Trial

The crackdown has extended to lawyers, particularly those handling religious rights cases. In March, officials revoked the license of Beijing's Yitong Law Firm; the firm's lawyers had been handling cases for unregistered house church Christians.

Christian attorney Gao Zhisheng, known for defending unregistered Protestant Christians and Falun Gong members, disappeared in February. Immediately prior to his disappearance, Gao had published a report of torture endured during a September 2007 interrogation. At press time his whereabouts remained unknown. (See www.compassdirect.org "Action Urged for Missing Rights Activist," March 25.)

Court officials in November 2007 sentenced Gao's legal partner, Yang Maodong, to five years in prison for "illegal business practices." Prison guards have reportedly tortured Yang with electric shock batons and other implements.

Earlier, in September 2007, officials beat prominent religious freedom advocate and attorney Li Heping with electric batons and ordered him to stop practicing law. When he refused, officials revoked his license.

Given these developments, the commission has urged the U.S. government to include religious freedom concerns in its discussions with the Chinese government.

Under terms of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, U.S. government officials are obliged to address religious rights concerns with the government of any country designated as a Country of Particular Concern.

Authorities trying to keep secret arrests and sentences of Tibetan monks

By Nirmala Carvalho

AsiaNews (29.04.2009) / HRWF (05.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Chinese police is trying to keep under wraps news about the arrests of three Tibetan monks in Nagchu County as a court in Sichuan postpones the sentencing of Lama Phurbu Tsering.

The Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) has reported the arrest on 11 April for unknown reasons of Khensur Thupten Thapkhey, a former abbot of Shapten Monastery, and Geshe Tsultrim Gyaltzen. Nagchu police tried to deny it by saying that the two had gone to Lhasa to receive a Geshe, a Tibetan Buddhist academic degree for monks.

Another monk, Tsundue, who heads the Shapten Monastery's Democratic Management Committee, was also detained.

The families of all three monks are worried because of the lack of information about their fate.

Meanwhile a court in Sichuan has yet to rule in the case of Phurbu Tsering, a lama arrested on weapons charges.

The international attention prompted by the case is the probable cause of the delay, said the lama's lawyer, Li Fangping.

Phurbu, who runs two nunneries in Ganzi (Sichuan), is a charismatic figure among Tibetans. As a 'living Buddha' he is considered a paragon of virtue.

He is in jail since 18 May of last year when police found a gun and ammunition at his home.

He has always denied the charges, which many believe to be a fabrication against the Buddhist religious leader and fallout from last year's local anti-Chinese protests.

China still presses crusade against Falun Gong

By Andrew Jacobs

New York Time (27.04.2009) / HRWF (05.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - In the decade since the Chinese government began repressing Falun Gong, a crusade that human rights groups say has led to the imprisonment of tens of thousands of practitioners and claimed at least 2,000 lives, the world's attention has shifted elsewhere.

The drive against the spiritual group has eliminated its leadership, decimated the ranks of faithful and convinced many Chinese that the group is an “evil cult,” as the government contends. But 10 years on, the war on Falun Gong remains unfinished.

In the past year, as many as 8,000 practitioners have been detained, according to experts on human rights, and at least 100 have died in custody. Among them were Yu Zhou, 42, a popular Beijing musician, and Cao Changling, the 77-year-old vice director of a paper plant in Wuhan, whose bruised body was returned this family by the police last summer just as China was reveling in the glory of the Olympic Games.

In recent months, scores of practitioners have been given long prison terms, including Zhang Xingwu, a retired physics professor from Shandong Province who last week was sentenced to seven years after the police found Falun Gong literature in his apartment, according to family members.

The continued crackdown highlights the difficulty of eradicating a movement whose adherents stubbornly cling to their beliefs, but it also provides a window into the psyche of an authoritarian government that, despite its far-reaching power, remains deeply insecure.

From the outset, the group, which at its peak claimed to have millions of followers around China, insisted that it wanted only legal recognition, not political power. But the country’s top leaders were alarmed by the group’s ability to attract a devoted following from so many citizens — from retired functionaries to pimple-faced college students.

The decision to ban the group entirely was made after 10,000 Falun Gong adherents staged a silent protest outside the gates of Zhongnanhai, the Communist Party’s leadership compound in Beijing, to complain about reports in the state-run media that the group said were defamatory. Security forces apparently had no advance knowledge of the demonstration, which took place on April 25, 1999, and they began treating the group as a threat to national security.

“Even a soccer team with an organization like Falun Gong might have produced the same reaction,” said T. Kumar, the Asia advocacy director for Amnesty International.

Although the propaganda juggernaut has eased in recent years, Falun Gong remains a toxic subject in China. Few academics will speak about it on the record, and the Internet is scoured clean of information that might be construed as sympathetic to Falun Gong, an amalgam of Buddhism, mysticism and qigong, the traditional exercise regimen that remains broadly popular here.

For the Falun Gong devotees who practice in secret, the only glimmer of hope has come from a small but growing number of lawyers who have dared to take on their cases. Even if the legal efforts have mostly come to naught, until recently Falun Gong detainees were denied even the right to a lawyer.

Last week, Jiang Yu, a spokesman for the Foreign Ministry, reiterated the government’s long-held stance that Falun Gong warrants suppression because it emphasizes meditation and the paranormal over modern medicine. “The Falun Gong cult violates human rights by controlling people’s minds,” he said in response to a reporter’s query.

Among experts based outside the country, there is broad consensus that the government’s efforts have not done much to advance its own interests, at least internationally, where it has been dogged by allegations that it uses torture to crush believers into submission.

'The excesses and the savagery have really lowered the quality of the government and harmed its reputation abroad,' said Jerome Cohen, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and an expert on Chinese law. "They're paying a high price for the cruelty to these people."

According to Falun Gong followers and Chinese lawyers who take on their cases, that cruelty continues unabated.

Among those swept up in the purge were Yu Zhou, the musician, and his wife, Xu Na. They were stopped for speeding in January 2008, according to their lawyer. After the police found Falun Gong materials in their car, both were detained. Ten days later, Mr. Yu's sister was told that he was gravely ill, the result, she was told, of a hunger strike complicated by diabetes. His sister, Yu Qun, says her brother did not have diabetes. She contends that he died at the hands of his captors.

The family's efforts to investigate Mr. Yu's death have been thwarted by the police and prosecutors, who refuse to allow an autopsy or even issue a death certificate.

Ms. Xu, who is a well-known poet and painter, was given a three-year term.

"I don't understand why this happened to them because they didn't do anything to break the law and they weren't promoting the group," Ms. Yu said.

According to former detainees and human rights organizations, Falun Gong detainees are frequently subjected to harrowing abuse, particularly those who refuse to swear off their faith. Bu Dongwei, 41, a longtime adherent who spent three years in a labor camp, said he was forced to share a room with about 30 people, most of them petty thieves and drug addicts who were encouraged to abuse the Falun Gong detainees.

Mr. Bu, a trained geneticist, left China in December and now lives in Los Angeles.

While the group's initial goals were official legitimacy and an end to persecution, the ceaseless campaign against them has radicalized many adherents, especially those living outside China. In cities around the world, Falun Gong devotees — and their offbeat re-enactments of torture and gory visual aids — have become a common sight. The group has dedicated itself to the demise of the Communist Party, which has complicated the lives of adherents inside China.

Falun Dafa, the organization that oversees the movement from its headquarters in New York, is led by Li Hongzhi, a former grain clerk who began spreading his mystical brand of qigong in 1992 but fled China before the crackdown began. Once known for charismatic preaching, he has spent much of the past decade living a reclusive life in Queens.

David Ownby, the author of "Falun Gong and the Future of China," said that Mr. Li and his followers may have made a tactical mistake by massing in Beijing, but that the Communist Party erred by interpreting their actions as a threat to its rule.

"If either side had played their cards more intelligently, Falun Gong could have been co-opted by the government," said Mr. Ownby, who is a professor of East Asian studies at the University of Montreal. He added, "This horrific loss of life could have been avoided."

Jonathan Ansfield contributed reporting.

Detained Uyghur Christian in China taken to hospital

Family fears for his safety; planned Easter celebration near earthquake area quashed

By Sarah Page

Compass Direct News (17.04.2009) / HRWF (18.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Family members of detained Uyghur Christian Alimjan Yimit are increasingly concerned for his safety following reports that police and a prison doctor escorted him in handcuffs to a hospital in Kashgar two weeks ago.

Alimjan (Alimujiang Yimiti in Chinese) called out to onlookers, "I'm sick. Tell my lawyer to come quickly to see me," according to a China Aid Association (CAA) report.

Sources told Compass that Alimjan had been beaten in prison, although it was not clear who beat him or why.

The transfer from the Kashi Municipal Detention Center in Kashgar, Xinjiang province, came just one week after Alimjan's lawyer met with him to discuss a court trial anticipated in May. According to CAA, this was only the second time authorities have allowed anyone to visit Alimjan since his arrest in January 2008.

Court authorities last May returned Alimjan's case to state prosecutors, citing lack of evidence for charges of "leaking state secrets" and "inciting secession." Family, friends and work colleagues have insisted that Alimjan is a loyal citizen with no access to state secrets, and that his arrest was due largely to his Christian faith and association with foreign Christians.

Compass sources confirmed this week that Alimjan's family members are emotionally distraught over his continued detention and over lack of communication from prison authorities.

If convicted, Alimjan could face execution; Chinese authorities executed two alleged Uyghur separatists as recently as last Thursday (April 9).

Authorities first detained Alimjan on Jan. 12, 2008 on charges of endangering state security before formally re-arresting him on Feb. 20, 2008 for allegedly "inciting secession" and leaking state secrets to foreign organizations.

After court authorities returned Alimjan's case to state prosecutors and after their further investigation, his case was returned to court officials for consideration in mid-October.

Compass sources claim Kashgar authorities are wary of the case due to its sensitivity. Officials initially interrogated Alimjan during his employment for two foreign-owned companies and forbade him to discuss the questioning with anyone. In September 2007 they closed the business he then worked for and accused him of using it as a cover for "preaching Christianity" among the Uyghurs. Alimjan was arrested several months later on political charges.

A second Uyghur Christian, Osman Imin (Wusiman Yaming in Chinese), sentenced to two years in labor camp for "leaking state secrets" and "illegal proselytizing," is due for release this October. Authorities had originally called for a 10-15 year prison sentence for Osman but significantly reduced the term following international media attention.

Authorities permit Osman's wife and children to visit him once a month.

Human Rights Proposal

On Monday (April 13), as family members waited to hear news of Alimjan's condition, China's State Council released a new document outlining proposed human rights improvements. The document focused heavily on protecting the rights of prisoners and included a pledge to abolish torture and other forms of abuse within two years.

The "National Human Rights Action Plan" was one of several measures proposed by a Chinese government delegation at a United Nations review of China's human rights record held on Feb. 9.

The plan includes a ban on confessions extracted through torture and a new requirement for physical examinations before and after interrogations. It also affirms the right of prisoners to hire and meet with lawyers and to report abuses in writing to the appropriate authorities.

China's state-run English newspaper, the China Daily, reported on March 24 that bullying and torture were a significant problem in the nation's detention centers, and that at least five inmates had died under suspicious circumstances since Feb. 8, according to CAA.

SIDEBAR

'Break-through' for Christianity in China a Mirage

By Xu Mei

BEIJING, April 17 (Compass Direct News) – Prior to the event it was publicized abroad as the next great break-through for house church Christianity in China.

A giant, open celebration was to be held on Easter Sunday (April 12) in the western city of Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province. Finally, it seemed, the government would acknowledge the sacrificial work of house church Christians who came to Sichuan from throughout the country to help with rescue and reconstruction for those suffering from last May's earthquake. It would be an open admission that Christianity – even of the house church variety – was a positive element in Chinese society.

Verbal permission had been obtained for 2,500 house church Christians throughout China to meet for the special celebration entitled, "Build Up the Church and Bless Society." Some 50 government officials had been invited to the event, to be held at Chengdu's new exhibition center. Christians from Singapore and the United States flew in for it.

But the day before Easter, police abruptly informed the center that the event was cancelled. Organizers hastily changed the venue to a smaller, old exhibition center where only about 1,000 people could be accommodated. Plans for a more low-key event were stitched together, to start at 5 p.m. on Easter Sunday.

But even this was too much. An hour before the event, police barred the door. The foreigners left. None of the promised government officials turned up. A few hundred bemused Chinese house church Christians seized the opportunity to hold an impromptu worship service in a nearby parking lot.

Police intervened there, too, and arrested some local house church leaders. They were released later that evening.

The debacle comes after another much-publicized "break-through," a supposedly government-sponsored seminar in Beijing last Nov. 21-22 in which officials were said to

have met with house church leaders (see www.compassdirect.org, "Officials Reach Out to House Churches; Raids, Arrests Continue," Dec. 9, 2008). The chief organizer later denied there was any government involvement, much less a break-through.

Rather, a minor Non-Governmental Organization had assembled academics, including some Christians, to meet with house church leaders to discuss church-state relations and make proposals they hoped might be passed on to the government at some future stage.

Observers speculate that in both the symposium and the Easter celebration, Christians overseas and perhaps some younger Chinese Christians – who have less experience than their elders with the machinations of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – had overestimated the benevolence of government authorities. Faced with the enormity of an economic crisis, sources said, the government seems to be in no mood to take major steps to liberalize oppressive religious policies, let alone legalize house churches.

That the Beijing seminar was actually held, and that the Chengdu celebration could be organized only to be stopped at the last minute, could be viewed as hopeful signs of how the Chinese government has lumbered forward, at glacial pace, towards a more open policy towards Christians over the last decade or so. But powerful reactionary forces within the CCP view with dismay the extraordinary growth of the church, sources say.

Many officials still view Christianity – and especially house churches – as an ideological and political threat. Limits on the public expression of Christian worship and evangelism are clearly laid down in a welter of national, provincial and local documents issued by CCP and government over the past 25 years. Sources say minor infractions may be winked at, but major changes in a more liberal direction are not to be expected.

Officials are struggling to control a country that threatens to become increasingly uncontrollable. Depending on how long the economic recession grips China, sources say, it seems likely that for the next two years at least, the government will err on the side of caution.

Protestant clergyman arrested again in Beijing

AsiaNews (08.04.2009) / HRWF (08.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Christian House Churches continue to be persecuted in China. At dawn on 21 March Rev "Bike" Zhang Mingxuan, head of the more than 250,000-member Chinese House Church Alliance, was taken into custody.

Zhang, who was eventually released, spoke to the China Aid Association about his arrest, which occurred in Yanjiao (Hebei), where he had stopped overnight after celebrating a baptism.

"At 6 am on March 21, more than a dozen policemen and local leaders arrived from Yongle town, Tongzhou district. [. . .] They arrested and interrogated me, and confiscated my three cellphones and bank cards. They harshly interrogated me, and forced me to [follow them to] their office in Yongle town. [. . .] They searched me all over my body. They abused me and threatened to kill me."

He was eventually taken to the city of Nanyang (Henan), arriving at dawn the next day, and released later that afternoon. He was handed back his possessions, except for 150,000 from one of his bank accounts.

For years Zhang has been harassed and threatened by police. Because he is an influential leader in the House Church movement, the authorities want to isolate him from his wider community.

In fact he was arrested several times during the Olympics and shipped out of Beijing, he said.

He is also upset at the authorities because they had promised him that he and his family would be allowed back in the capital once the Beijing Games were over. So far this has not happened.

On 19 March another underground Protestant was arrested. Shi Weihai (pictured) was taken by police in Beijing for printing Christian literature and Bibles and giving them out without a government permit.

In his defence Mr Shi said that he gave away the Bibles; therefore, he could be charged with "illegal business practices."

In the written confession police extracted from him he said that reading the Bible can make people better citizens.

In mainland China underground Protestant communities have more than 50 million members. Since 2007 a campaign has been underway to either eliminate them or force them into the Three Autonomies Movement, a government-sponsored organisation that is officially in charge of China's Protestants.

China mounting obstacles to dialogue

By Nicole Winfield

AP (02.04.2009) / HRWF (04.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Vatican on Thursday denounced new arrests of Catholic bishops in China and accused Beijing authorities of mounting "obstacles" to having a dialogue with the Holy See.

The Vatican press office issued the complaint at the close of an annual Vatican meeting that is studying the problems of the Catholic Church in China.

Pope Benedict XVI has made improving often tense relations with Beijing a priority of his papacy. In China, worship is allowed only in state-backed churches. Millions of Chinese, however, belong to unofficial congregations that are loyal to Rome.

In 2007, Benedict sent a special letter to Catholics in China, praising the underground church but also urging the faithful to reconcile with followers of the official church.

In Thursday's statement, the Vatican denounced the new arrest of the bishop of Zhengding, Monsignor Giulio Jia Zhiguo, and lamented that other priests had been detained or subjected to "undeserved pressures" by government authorities.

"Such situations create obstacles to the climate of dialogue with the competent authorities which the Holy Father vividly hoped for in his letter," said the statement from the Vatican press office.

In China, the vice chairman of the official Catholic church insisted Beijing's determination to improve relations remained steady.

"The position of the Chinese side has not changed. The Chinese government always hopes to improve ties between the two sides at the earliest date possible," said Liu Bainian, of the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, the party-controlled body that oversees the state-backed Catholic church.

Liu said he was unaware of both the Vatican statement and of Jia's alleged arrest, but added: "If someone breaks the law, that should not be seen as China creating a hindrance to improving ties."

China forced its Roman Catholics to cut ties with the Vatican in 1951, shortly after the officially atheist Communist Party took power. The state-backed churches recognize the pope as a spiritual leader but appoint their own priests and bishops.

Liu also reiterated Beijing's preconditions for improving ties with the Vatican, calling on the Holy See to not interfere in China's internal affairs and to cut ties with Taiwan, a self-governed island that Beijing considers part of its territory.

The Rev. Bernardo Cervellera, whose Vatican-affiliated missionary news agency closely follows the plight of the Catholic Church in China, said Beijing authorities had been cracking down recently on both underground and official prelates.

Priests have been arrested for celebrating underground Masses and prelates belonging to the official church have been forced to publicly criticize Vatican interference, Cervellera wrote this week in AsiaNews. He said the crackdown was aimed at breaking the ties forming between the official and underground churches.

China's absence from European Parliament hearing slams the door in Tibetans' face

ALDE (01.04.2009) / HRWF (02.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Following the Radical party and ALDE Group's initiative, the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee called a public hearing on Tibet yesterday in Brussels.

In many resolutions, the EP has supported the dialogue between the Chinese authorities and Dalai Lama to promote Tibet's autonomy within Chinese borders.

Considering the breakdown in negotiations, yesterday's hearing is focused on explaining to the Chinese authorities and the Tibetan government's objectives.

At this meeting, the first organized by an international institution, both negotiators were invited. Despite the appeal subscribed by several Nobel Prize winners and other international personalities, the

Chinese authorities declined the invitation to the meeting and so have effectively broken off possible dialogue with the international community.

"The Chinese authorities have lost an important chance to have a dialogue with the Dalai Lama's representatives. Now we urge the European Union to formally appeal to the Chinese authorities to restart the negotiations to recognize Tibet's real autonomy. Even Commissioner Ferrero Waldner admitted the important role of the Memorandum presented by the envoys of the Dalai Lama" - Cappato said

Dalai Lama rival steps into spotlight

By Michael Bristow

BBC (31.03.2009) / HRWF (02.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - China has pushed a young bespectacled monk into the spotlight in an effort to show that it governs Tibet with a benign hand.

Officials have launched a vigorous propaganda battle over recent weeks, to demonstrate that Tibetans are thriving under Beijing's direction.

And the man China selected as its Panchen Lama, the second most important figure in Tibetan Buddhism, has been at the forefront of that campaign.

Although he is only 19, the Panchen Lama has already stepped onto the public stage to praise the Chinese Communist Party.

Tibet expert Professor Robert Barnett, of New York's Columbia University, says this is part of China's efforts to undermine the appeal of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhism.

"He will never really replace the Dalai Lama, but his role confuses the picture and can gradually be used to weaken the Dalai Lama's standing," he said.

"I think [China's] Panchen Lama is being built up very gradually as a public spokesman within the Tibetan Buddhist world."

Lavish praise

The Dalai Lama's choice of Panchen Lama - a young boy called Gedhun Choekyi Nyima - was rejected by China, and disappeared soon afterwards.

China's choice, Gyaincain Norbu, has been largely kept from public view since his appointment at the age of five.

But now officials are keen for the world to hear about a young man they depict as a diligent student who loves horse riding and jogging.

Foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang said on Tuesday that China hoped he would help maintain the country's "territorial integrity".

The Panchen Lama has made three high-profile forays into the spotlight over the last few weeks to coincide with Serfs' Emancipation Day last Saturday.

This is a new holiday introduced by China to mark the day on which the Dalai Lama's rule in Tibet was officially dissolved - a day China celebrates as the start of the liberation of ordinary Tibetans.

The Panchen Lama first visited an exhibition in Beijing showing the economic and social progress China says has taken place in Tibet over the last 50 years.

He also penned an article that appeared in the state-controlled People's Daily, one of China's most important news outlets.

In the article he lavished praise on the Communist Party, which he said had brought prosperity to Tibet.

"[We should] uphold the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and contribute more to national unity and the happiness of Tibetan people," he wrote.

And just a few days ago the monk gave a speech at the Second World Buddhist Forum in China's Jiangsu Province.

Although the forum was about religion, the Panchen Lama's speech - delivered in English - had an overtly political message.

"This forum is convened in my country - China," he said, suggesting that he does not support Tibetan independence.

"This event fully demonstrates that today's China enjoys social harmony, stability and religious freedom," he went on.

It was a rebuke to Tibetan exiles, including the Dalai Lama, who insist that China's rule in Tibet over the last 50 years has been repressive.

Great hopes

China has made great play of its Panchen Lama's public appearances.

State-controlled Xinhua news agency published a report on the forum speech under the headline: "Panchen Lama says China enjoys religious freedom."

There was also a hint in the report of just how much China hopes this monk will be able to act as its public face on Tibetan issues.

"We disciples of Tibetan Buddhism pin great hopes on him," Xinhua quoted Jalsan, president of the Buddhist Association of Inner Mongolia, as saying.

Previously, little was known about China's Panchen Lama and how he lived his life, which has been spent largely in Beijing.

But on Tuesday Xinhua published an in-depth interview with him, revealing a host of personal details.

The man Xinhua described as "elegant" said he spent most of his time studying Buddhism. But there is time for relaxation.

"About 5% of my time [is] spent on entertainment, such as reading newspapers, books and sports," he told Xinhua.

"I read all kinds of books, but I like historical books most. I also read some fiction and essays in Tibetan and Chinese."

But there was no mention in the article of the other Panchen Lama, chosen by the Dalai Lama in 1995.

Two years ago, an official from the Tibetan Autonomous Region told the BBC that this Panchen Lama was living a quiet life in Lhasa, although many Tibetans say he is a political prisoner.

China cracks down in Muslim West

By Alexa Olesen

AP (30.03.2009) - An overseas rights activist said Monday that authorities in China's predominantly Muslim far west are closing unregistered Islamic schools and conducting house-to-house searches in a new security crackdown in the restive region.

The campaign under way for five weeks in the city of Hotan underscores Beijing's persisting concerns about separatist movements in its Central Asian border province of Xinjiang.

While anti-government protests and a security clampdown in Tibetan areas have grabbed attention over the past year, China has also been battling unrest in Xinjiang, with a flare-up in violence last year that killed 33 people. Like the Tibetans, many of Xinjiang's ethnic minority Uighurs have chafed under Beijing's rule and restrictions on the practice of religion.

The clampdown in Hotan _ once a jade-trading center on the Silk Road and still a bastion of Uighur culture _ was meant to quash dissent before August's anniversary marking communist troops' entry to Xinjiang 60 years ago, the Germany-based World Uighur Congress said Monday.

A congress spokesman, Dilxat Raxit, said in an e-mail that armed police were making nighttime raids from house to house. At least seven religious schools have been shut and 39 people arrested so far, Raxit said.

The official Xinhua News Agency earlier this month reported that Hotan authorities had launched a campaign against "illegal religious activity" at the end of February and "had already achieved some initial success."

"Officials uncovered some illegal religious activities, seized a large number of illegal books, handwritten materials, computer discs, audio tapes and other propaganda materials as well as bullets, fuses, explosive and flammable materials, and other weaponry," it said.

A secretary with Hotan's Communist Party Propaganda Department on Monday denied that any religious schools were closed, people arrested or bullets, explosives and other materials seized. But he confirmed that some illegal religious activity has been halted and illegal books, writings, computer discs and audio tapes had been confiscated.

He refused to give his name or any more information and referred calls to other departments where the phone rang unanswered or officials said they were not authorized to speak to the media.

The clampdown is consistent with previous efforts to target a resurgent Islam that the government says is fanning radical, violent separatism in Xinjiang. A year ago, several hundred Muslims staged a protest in Hotan that rights groups said was against a ban on women wearing headscarves but that the government said was incited by an overseas Islamic group.

Uighur separatists have waged a low-intensity campaign of sporadic bombings and assassinations for the past 20 years as social controls loosened along with free-market reforms and as more ethnic Chinese came to Xinjiang in search of work.

Last August, violence in Xinjiang killed 33 people, including 16 border guards slain when two attackers rammed a stolen truck into the group before tossing bombs and stabbing them.

Persecution in China as Vatican meeting on China opens

By Bernardo Cervellera

AsiaNews (30.03.2009) - The Commission for the Catholic Church in China began its second meeting today in the Vatican. In the meantime in China believers and members of the underground Church are subjected to ever more repression with several bishops and priests under arrest and tighter controls on state-controlled Churches. Sources told AsiaNews that the squeeze is on underground communities in Hebei province near Beijing (home to the highest concentration of Catholics in the country), including on people who meet just to celebrate Mass.

In fact a few days ago, 55-year-old Fr Paul Ma, a priest in Dung Lü, was arrested for celebrating the Eucharist with a few underground parishioners. Members of his congregation are concerned about his fate because he has heart condition and is not likely to get treatment whilst in detention. Controls and arrests are up because of the coming anniversary of the death of Mgr Joseph Fan Xueyan, bishop of Baoding, who was killed by police in 1992. The faithful traditionally visit his grave and organise prayers in memory of the martyr.

After decades in concentration camps, Bishop Fan was seized by police in early 1992. On 13 April of that year police reported him dead, his body showing torture marks, left at night stuffed in a plastic bag on the front door of relatives.

Sources told AsiaNews that two other bishops from the underground Church have been missing for a number of years lost somewhere in police custody with nothing known about their fate.

The first one is Mgr James Su Zhimin (diocese of Baoding, Hebei), 75, who was arrested in 1996. Nothing was known about him until November 2003 when he was spotted in a police-controlled hospital in Baoding, undergoing treatment for heart and eye problems, only to vanish a few days later.

The second clergyman is Mgr Cosma Shi Enxiang (diocese of Yixian, Hebei), 86, who was arrested on 13 April 2001, never to be heard of again. Ordained in 1982 Monsignor Shi had spent 30 years in prison. Arrested in December 1990 and released in 1993, he was forced to live in isolation until his latest arrest.

According to the aforementioned sources, tens of underground priests are also languishing in prison and forced labour camps. Tens of other underground bishops are being held in isolation as well.

The official Church is also not free from repression, tight controls and hardships. In recent months government-approved bishops have been forced to undergo weeks, sometimes months, of political sessions that focus on the importance of the Communist Party's religious policy.

Some bishops, like that of Beijing, have been forced to publicly praise the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA) and criticise "Vatican interference" in the internal affairs of China.

Of late pressures have increased because almost all official bishops are secretly in communion with the Holy See and many are working with their underground counterpart, much to the annoyance of the authorities who are not pleased with the reconciliation between the underground and official Church by a "foreign power," i.e. the Pope.

Since Benedict XVI released a Letter to Chinese Catholics in June 2007 acts of reconciliation between the two branches of the Church in China have occurred, with the effect of marginalising the CPCA, the Communist party agency that controls the Church.

The wave of harassment underway is thus meant to break this new found unity.

For the purpose the CPCA has organised nation-wide meetings ahead of the election of its new chairman as well as that of the Council of Chinese Bishops (a body like a normal Catholic Bishops' Conference but without the Vatican seal of approval).

Both positions are vacant. CPCA chairman Michael Fu Tieshan, who was elected in 1998, passed away in 2007. Mgr Joseph Liu Yuanren, patriotic bishop of Nanking who was elected chairman of the Council of Bishops in 2004, has been dead since 2005.

In the making for several months, a National Congress of Catholic Representatives is supposed to fill the two vacant positions. If it has not taken place yet it is because many official bishops do not want to participate.

Cardinal Zen, in a message to Chinese bishops released last December, asked them to boycott the meeting, to honour their communion with the Pope, who in his 2007 Letter said that Catholic doctrine and CPCA ideals and policies are "irreconcilable".

The commission that meets today in the Vatican till Thursday includes some 30 people, superiors and members of the Secretariat of State of the Holy See and of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples as well as representatives of the Chinese episcopate like Card Joseph Zen of Hong Kong, his coadjutor Mgr John Tong Hon, Mgr Jose Lai Hung-seng of Macao, Mgr John Hung Shan-chuan of Taipei and Mgr Bosco Lin Chi-nan of Tainan (Taiwan).

The meeting, which was announced in the Osservatore Romano, will also include discussions "on important and current religious questions."

Police arrest underground Zhengding bishop Jia Zhiguo

AsiaNews (31.03.2009) - Bishop Julius Jia Zhiguo, the underground bishop of Zhengding (Hebei), was arrested yesterday by police and taken away to an undisclosed location. The arrest took place in conjunction with the meeting at the Vatican of the Plenary Commission on the Church in China.

Yesterday afternoon at four o'clock (local time), 5 police officers and two vehicles appeared outside the bishop's home and took him to an undisclosed location. Bishop Jia, 74, suffers from various disturbances because of past imprisonments and his age, and the faithful of the diocese are concerned that this new arrest could endanger his life.

For years, Jia has endured arrest and isolation by the police, who have kept him away from his community for months. During these periods, the police have tried to indoctrinate him on the religious policies of the Party, and to force him to join the Patriotic Association (PA).

This time, the motives are even more serious, and strike at the heart of the Vatican's attempts to reconcile the official and underground Church in Hebei, the region with the highest concentration of Catholics.

Months ago, Jang Taoran, the bishop of Shijiazhuang (Hebei), the diocese of the official Church in the area, reconciled with the Holy See, and agreed - at instructions from the Vatican - to work with Bishop Jia Zhiguo, becoming his auxiliary bishop. Bishop Jia would become, instead, the ordinary bishop of the diocese, while remaining in the underground Church and without the recognition of the government.

The two bishops have met frequently, and have begun to construct a common pastoral plan. But as soon as the Patriotic Association became aware of these signs of reconciliation, it required the bishops to stop meeting together, and put them under police surveillance 24 hours a day. According to some local sources, the police told Bishop Jia Zhiguo that "this unity [editor's note: between the two bishops] is bad because it is desired by a foreign power like the Vatican. If there must be unity, it must come through the government and the PA." When Bishop Jia resisted joining the PA, the police began to laugh at the bishop, saying that the government will put another bishop in his place, and that for him "it is time to retire, since he is sick."

The meeting of the Vatican Commission on the Church in China, which will continue until tomorrow, was intended to address the issues involved in the implementation of the pope's letter to Chinese Catholics, which was published in June of 2007. In it, Benedict XVI had urged the official Church and the underground Church to foster reconciliation, and had called the ideals and the structure of the Patriotic Association "incompatible" with the Catholic faith, because it intends to create a national Church independent from the Holy See.

China turns to Buddhism to calm Tibet, Taiwan tensions

By Lucy Hornby

Reuters (28.03.2009) / HRWF (30.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Beijing-backed Panchen Lama addressed an international Buddhist audience in English on Saturday, as officially atheist China turned to Buddhism as a balm for internal unrest and international tensions.

Gargantuan, baroque recreations of Tibetan and South Asian prayer palaces, built in a vast park that holds an ancient Buddhist site, show the resources and the historic symbolism that the Chinese state can draw on to claim the Buddhist mantle.

The second World Buddhist Forum jointly hosted by Communist China and Taiwanese Buddhists in Wuxi attracted over 1,000 monks, nuns and adherents from around the world. Its theme of "harmonious world" echoed the "harmonious society" slogans of Chinese President Hu Jintao.

"I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to our central government for their kindly concern in hosting this forum," the Panchen Lama said in clear English.

"This event fully demonstrates that today's China enjoys social harmony, stability and religious freedom, and also shows that China is a nation that safeguards and promotes world peace."

The use of English implies that the 19-year-old Panchen, who was selected and raised by Beijing, is being groomed as a foil to the exiled Dalai Lama, who used his celebrity to keep the Tibetan cause in the international eye.

On Friday, the Panchen issued a veiled warning against the Dalai Lama in a speech delivered in Chinese in Beijing.

Tibetan areas are under military lockdown, one year after widespread protests against Chinese rule. Fifty years ago this March, the Dalai Lama fled to India following a failed uprising, and China has declared Saturday a holiday to commemorate the end of serfdom in Tibet.

But there was a note of conciliation in the presence of Abbot Hsing Yun, one of Taiwan's most influential monks and an advocate for improved relations between the Dalai Lama and China.

"All the exiled Tibetans should support China; the Communist Party should welcome them back," Hsing Yun told reporters on Friday. He noted the "positive merits" of the monk Beijing demonizes as a separatist.

Cooperating on the forum could help strengthen ties between China and self-ruled Taiwan, which have been warming since the Nationalists, or Kuomintang party, regained the presidency last year. Over 1,000 delegates fly directly to Taiwan on Monday, a trip that would have been impossible a few years ago.

"I hope for increased exchanges, back and forth. The more exchanges there are, the more people can't distinguish between the two, and that will lead to unity," Hsing Yun said.

China has claimed sovereignty over Taiwan since the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949 and has vowed to bring the island under mainland rule, by force if necessary.

Revival

The Communist Party tried to root out Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism during the first three decades of its rule, but now recognizes the potential of religion to maintain stability.

"Buddhism has proven to have two benefits, it brings a spiritual peace to society and it also helps materially, for instance in disasters and in serving the weakest segments of society," said Shih Lien Hai, president of the World-wide Buddhist Development Association based in Taiwan.

"Religion is a force for stability in society. If government could understand religion's attributes, if it could bring religion's strengths into play, it would be more effective."

The Chinese government may also hope to gain moral sway through adopting the mantle of traditional religion, even as Maoism once inspired idealists throughout the developing world.

It already enjoys increased international stature, thanks to careful diplomacy and the spectacular economic growth that has made it the world's third-largest economy, but the crackdown in Tibet has damaged perceptions worldwide.

There was little that was spiritual about the forum, which featured speeches by officials and dignitaries and a precisely orchestrated spectacle that required a cast of thousands.

But the Panchen Lama urged Buddhism's relevance to a world worried by environmental degradation, the growing disparity between rich and poor, the financial crisis and terrorism.

The fifth encounter between Christianity and China: Only persevering in dialogue can lead to success

Four encounters between Christianity and China did not succeed

HRWF (26.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Historically the four encounters which have taken place between Christianity and Chinese culture, present a dramatic history! Today Christians in China still suffer the negative consequences of the failures of the past. However, in the recent twenty five years, the Chinese people have shown an increasing interest in Christianity, in ways never experienced before. Will this fifth encounter between Christianity and modern China succeed? While we can only speculate, it is very clear after so many failures, that the encounter will not succeed if the Church turns back on the road of confrontation. Only by persevering in dialogue will the Christian faith find its home in the hearts and mind of the Chinese people. Both sides must liberate themselves from the old and fruitless traumas of the past. From the beginning of his pontificate Pope Benedict XVI has called for dialogue in the Church in China: not the so called “patriotic” nor “underground” “churches”, but simply the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church in China. The obvious question which looms large in this scenario is: Will the Chinese civil authorities agree and engage in this dialogue in sincerity and truth?

A history marked by confrontation and failed attempts to acculturate

When the Nestorians introduced the Bible into China in the 7th century, they strove to be guided by adaptation to Chinese culture and extant religious customs. Yet, due to historical situations in China, within two centuries, the Nestorian Church was completely destroyed. In the 13th century, the Franciscans re-introduced Christianity into China and also strove to adapt the Church to the culture of the Mongolians, who ruled China at the time. Subsequently, again due to political turmoil, the Mongolian Church was eradicated when the Ming Chinese expelled the alien Mongols from China. Thus two remarkable attempts to adapt Christianity to China failed.

During the 17th century the Jesuits were pioneers of dialogue in respect for Chinese culture and religions. Regrettably, what the Jesuits considered as valuable and totally acceptable in Chinese culture, the Dominicans and other missionary orders considered as pure superstition. Confrontation instead of dialogue now grew both *inside* the Church and between the Church and China as a culture and civil society. This tragic confrontational development, caused Emperor Kangxi to withdraw his Edict of Tolerance – castigating Catholic faith officially as “*foreign*” and “*not fit for China*”.

This historic trauma rooted in confrontation and discord, continues to be a heavy cross born by Chinese Christians as they strive to renew and develop their Church as a fully acculturated and authentic expression of Christianity in China today. The Emperor's expulsion of the missionaries and suppression of the Catholic Church was the “bitter fruit” of confrontation.

The fourth encounter between Christianity and China also brought shame upon the Church during the 19th and 20th centuries. Western colonial powers at that time exploited the weakness of China, which led to the Opium War (1840). Haplessly, the Church was involved in drafting the text of the Unequal Treaties between China and the colonial powers. She herself became later entirely controlled by the French Protectorate. As a result, the Church was identified with the colonial imperialistic powers. This remained China's oft repeated accusation against the Church during the Cultural Revolution (1965-75); and even until today is exploited at China's convenience. Although China was never able to take revenge against England or France for their outrages, it raged against the Church particularly on two occasions: once during the Boxer Uprising (1900) when thousands of Catholics and dozens of missionaries were murdered; and again during the Cultural Revolution (1965-1975) when radical slogans confirmed the cruel persecution, destruction and plundering of the Church as vengeance for what happened during the 19th century. During that tragic era, Church-State Relation in China can only be described with the words "*confrontation*" and "*conflict*".

Although the time of Mao Zedong, the Cultural Revolution, and even Marxism, belongs to the past in China, there is still an evident lack of religious freedom today. Nonetheless, at the same time, there is an undeniable acceptance of Christianity among the Chinese people, with exceptional increase in both Catholic and Protestant believers. How shall China and the Church deal with this new - the fifth - encounter between Christianity and Chinese culture and society? Both the Church and the State have an historic responsibility to assure that this fifth encounter should not fail. While it is unrealistic to expect that atheistic China and the Catholic Church might be friends, both carry with them the traumas of their own past; and both can only achieve stability and progress by putting an end to their old confrontational ways. Dialogue is the only way to these ends. Turning away from confrontation and persevering on the road of dialogue is the historic challenge which both the Church and State in China are faced with at this historic juncture.

Vatican Council II: pioneer in promoting dialogue

Long ago the Church was in conflict with the world; and then it was in confrontation. Since Vatican II the Church became a pioneer in the promotion of dialogue. In 1937, as Stalin sought to destroy the Church, Pope Pius XI wrote his encyclical "*Divini Redemptoris*" ("*Divine Redeemer*"). Historic circumstances prompted the pope to speak a harsh language of condemnation. Several years later an identical situation arose in China - both before and during the Cultural Revolution. Pope Pius XII wrote condemning language in "*Ad Apostolorum Principis*" ("*At the tomb of the prince of the Apostles*" - March, 23, 1958) just ten days after Chinese authorities had defiantly ordered two bishops to be ordained without papal authorization...part of a more general situation of confrontation among the nations in the world which came to be known as the Cold War.

Nonetheless, history went on its course, and new situations evolved. In 1963 Pope John XXIII wrote "*Pacem in Terris*" ("*Peace on Earth*") in which he stressed that the Church is open to different ideologies in the world. That was indeed a new ecclesial voice. In August 1964, at the beginning of the third session of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI wrote his important encyclical letter "*Ecclesiam Suam*" ("*His Church*") in which the word "*dialogue*" appeared for the first time in an official Church document. It meant the beginning of a

new phase in Church history. These calls for dialogue echoed an important discovery of Vatican II: namely, the need of the Church to enter into dialogue with the world. They were an answer to emerging new global realities. The Church too wished to move with the times and continue further along the path of dialogue. While nations, religions and cultures were seemingly just discovering the need for dialogue, the Church since the time of Pope John XXIII was already promoting it.

Dialogue: an essential element of evangelization

During Vatican II the Church came to understand that dialogue with the world is an essential element of evangelization. This was a new insight for the Church in her own mission. Evangelization does not only consist in preaching the gospel, it presupposes as an essential dimension of such preaching, a willingness to learn from and be respectful of those who receive the message; the more so, if our hearers are not only not our friends, but may even be outright opponents to the Church. It might even happen that they remain opposed and that in a moment of confrontation, the content of the gospel message is rejected. Such confrontation however need not cause an outright conflict or rupture. Rather a challenge arises to both partners to pass beyond the confrontation and to search for a way to live together, even to work together for a common good without betraying either one's own identity. The fruit of this dialogue is then a peaceful and fruitful coexistence which portends a measure of real progress, compared to the negative consequences of confrontation and conflict. At this time in history the whole world, including the Church, is uniquely undergoing a learning process from which there is no turning back. With every passing day, the irreversible process of globalization signals ever more clearly the need to engage in dialogue in every sphere of human interaction – doing so with mutual appreciation among and between religions, cultures and states.

Promoting dialogue with China was a priority of the popes for forty years

Rapprochement and dialogue with the Peoples Republic of China has been a papal pre-occupation beginning with the reign of Paul VI, continued under John Paul II and now with Benedict XVI. In 1970, two years before President Richard Nixon visited China, during a stopover in Hong Kong, Pope Paul VI, accompanied by the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Casarole, spoke with solicitude and affection for China and the Chinese people. The same year Paul VI pleaded at an FAO meeting (UN Food and Agricultural Organization), to admit China as a member of FAO.

During his long pontificate, Pope John Paul II demonstrated a remarkable will to dialogue with China. He avoided all obstacles and setbacks and sidestepped all situations of confrontation. He acquiesced in something that China never obtained from the real imperialists – France, England, Japan – offering a public apology for whatever the Church might possibly have done offending China during the 19th century. China could hardly have asked for a more to enter into dialogue. Yet China remained silent and has not effectively responded until today! Even though the Church takes serious exception to situations where religious freedoms are denied in China, she still insists that confrontation is not an option. In January 2007, in an historic first Pope Benedict XVI convened a China Consultation to discuss precisely these issues. The advice of the experts at this consultation was clear: to remain in a mode of dialogue, while avoiding confrontation with China. Benedict repeated this even more clearly in his Pastoral Letter to the Church in China (June 30, 2007). In essence his message concludes: whoever

would advocate today for confrontation with China ignores forty years of precedence and only thwarts all that has been achieved this far by the popes in walking the road of constructive dialogue with China.

Promoting dialogue inside the Church and with the government in China is delicate and demanding

In our cooperation as sister Churches with the Church in China, and in our contacts with civil authorities, we follow the guidelines of Pope Benedict XVI. His pastoral letter may be summarized in three words: *engaging in dialogue, promoting reconciliation and building unity*. For several decades now, the Church in China has sadly been divided into two communities. Each has opted for its own way to survive in a very complex and ambiguous Chinese situation, while remaining true to their Catholic faith. We believe, with Pope Benedict XVI, that both are indeed faithful and united with the universal Church. We wish to loosen internal tensions, to encourage contacts between the two communities and by all means to avoid confrontation.

This task is delicate and demanding. It means first of all that Christians outside of China remain in dialogue with both Church communities, listening to both and "*in caritate et veritate*" (in charity and truth) try to understand both. Those who opt for maintaining contacts with one or the other exclusively, are acting against the guidelines of the pope. We cannot expect that Chinese Christians who suffered persecution for years and who are still harassed today, should suddenly free themselves from old attitudes of confrontation and start speaking a language of dialogue. We also should fully understand that the harassment which they undergo today only serves to confirm them in their attitude of confrontation. Not surprisingly, they may even be irritated when those who have not endured their sufferings call upon them to be open and to enter into dialogue. This however, should not be an excuse for those of us outside of China to confirm them in their confrontational attitudes. This would only serve to confirm the existing bitterness and further undercut the call of the pope to dialogue. We should rather draw their attention to the points touching upon the identity of our faith which the pope continually stresses as non-negotiable. While dialogue is the main line stressed by the Benedict XVI in the Pastoral Letter, it does imply an element of "*confrontation within the dialogue*".

It is precisely around these points of disagreement that we must search for a *modus vivendi* in the dialogue with civil authorities. It is a grievous distortion to isolate and cite this paragraph out of context, and thereby reduce the whole letter to a "call to confrontation"! This is to betray the spirit and intent of the letter which is at heart a call for reconciliation, dialogue, unity. To encourage Christians in China today to speak the out-dated confrontational language of "Divini Redemptoris" is an anachronism. It only serves to confirm divisions inside the Church and will lead the Catholic Church in China and civil authorities onto a dead-end street of confrontation and deepened animosity.

We must also try to understand those who, in line with the wish of the pope, work in dialogue with civil authorities while remaining united with the Holy See. These people bear the heat of the day; while also suffering the opprobrium of those who misjudge their earnest intentions. On occasion we are perhaps shocked when one of them accepts to read a public statement imposed on him *per force*, seemingly questioning basic principles of the Church. These people apparently judge, that in a situation of such un-freedom, they are justified in doing so. It is fruitless and we would be guilty of rash

judgment to confront our brothers on these matters in the media. Rather we ought to strive to clarify the matter through personal contact and dialogue. Only frank communication with and understanding for both partners in the Chinese Church, will resolve the contradictions and bear fruit.

In this way, out of a seemingly hopeless division, a “*united front of Christians*” can grow, not in confrontation with the authorities, nor to compromise in any way our identity, but towards dialogue to develop a *modus vivendi* in respect for the identity of each. This will lead to a new situation replacing the confrontation and conflicts of the past. It is by far more demanding but is more in line with Christian faith to dialogue frankly and try to solve disputes, rather than to encourage confrontation. Dialogue builds up confrontation destroys.

The challenge of China and of the Church is to remain engaged in dialogue

China and the Church are both caught in a three centuries old confrontation which was acerbated last century by the encyclical “*Divini Redemptoris*” and reached its dramatic peak during the Cultural Revolution. This confrontation produced deep mutual distrust from which both partners can only free themselves by a serious effort; yet this is the condition for dialogue. The fact that civil authorities in China are internally also divided and adopt different approaches towards religion, complicates the situation. Even today some officials still speak of religion using expressions of the Cultural Revolution era while others promote the construction of a harmonious society. These declarations contradict each other. It is hard to imagine how the civil authorities can afford such internal divisions while so much social unrest grows daily in their country! Each time a local authority in China persecutes the Church it creates a potential hotbed of unrest. By adopting a more reasonable attitude to solve problems of the Church, the government would find in the Church a partner for building a harmonious society.

Unfortunately incitement to confrontation coming from abroad offers these local officials an easy pretext to continue the persecution. Nevertheless, we hope that those who still opt for confrontation will not block those who follow the pope on the way of dialogue and cooperation. Christians in China expect more freedom of religion. Yet, perhaps we are not fully using the freedom to evangelize that already exists. Let us support the evangelization projects that are going on and not block them.

The letter of Pope Benedict XVI and the proposal to dialogue is an offer of the Church. The atheistic government of China cannot afford to refuse this offer if it wishes to bring the situation of religious freedom in China to an internationally acceptable level. Meaningful recognition of Christianity by civil authorities and unity inside the Church in China would, in both instances, be an historic breakthrough, namely: a fifth and finally fruitful encounter between Christianity and China that would yield very positive benefits to both the society and the Church.

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China prepares for post-Dalai Lama era

March 2009 will go down as the month in which Tibet entered the countdown for the era after the Dalai Lama

By Mark O'Neill

Asia Sentinel (22.03.2009) / HRWF (25.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A month supposed to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 'peaceful liberation' of Tibet ended with the region in a virtual state of martial law, with heavily armed troops patrolling the streets and the Dalai Lama denouncing Chinese rule of his homeland as 'hell on earth'.

For his part, China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi warned foreign countries not to allow the Dalai Lama to visit. "They should not let him use their territory to engage in secessionist activities," he told a news conference on March 7.

The growing hostility between the two sides made several points clear. One is that there will be no meaningful negotiations between Beijing and the Dalai Lama and no change in the status of Tibet.

The second is that, despite widespread public support in the west, the exiled Tibetan government will receive no significant help from a major power.

In March, more than 100,000 people, including film stars and several Nobel Peace Prize winners, signed an open letter to Chinese President Hu Jintao, calling for an improvement to the human rights of Tibetans, and Tibetan exiles held demonstrations in capitals around the world. But the reality is that no major government will come to their aid. As the financial crisis worsens, so the economic strength and diplomatic clout of China strengthens. More than ever, the major powers need its capital, investment and access to its market.

Safe in this knowledge, Beijing can treat Tibet as an internal matter. Its policy is, while ruling with an iron fist, to raise living standards to win the hearts and minds of Tibetans. According to official figures published this month, the region's economy has grown at an annual average of at least 12 per cent a year over the past seven years, with a GDP in 2007 of 34.2 billion yuan in 2007. The annual income of urban Tibetans in 2005 was 9,000 yuan, up from 400 in 1979, while those of rural Tibetans rose to 1,200 yuan from 150 over the same period.

It said that, over the past five years, the government had invested 8.22 billion yuan in education in Tibet and provided free medical care to the farmers and shepherds, who account for 80 per cent of the population. The average life expectancy has risen from 35.5 years in the 1950s to 67 now.

Since 1980, the government says it spent more than 700 million yuan on 1,400 monasteries and cultural relics. It said the number of ethnic Tibetans in Tibet doubled from 1.21 million in 1964 to 2.41 million in 2000.

With the impasse in negotiations, each side is preparing for the post-Dalai Lama era. Beijing intends to pick his successor in accordance with traditional rites -- a young boy in the territories in China occupied by Tibetans. It will then control both the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, the second highest leader in Tibetan Buddhism.

Faced with this, the Dalai Lama said last year that he may appoint a successor himself or have one chosen democratically by the senior Tibetan monks. His most likely choice is to split his political and religious duties: he will remain as a religious leader and give someone else his political functions.

This has become more likely with the deterioration in his health. Last year, he had surgery to remove gallstones removed in a New Delhi hospital, six weeks after spending six days in a Bombay hospital for abdominal pain. He is 73.

The front-runner to succeed him in his political role is Karmapa Lama, 24, the head of Kagyu sect, who ranks third in Tibetan Buddhism. Born in a mountainous area of eastern Tibet, he was recognized as the leader of the Kagyu sect at the age of seven after a joint search by the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama and enthroned on September 27, 1992.

In late December 1999, at the age of 14, he fled Tibet for India, where he lives in Dharamsala and has devoted himself to study and preaching and spoken little about politics. The Dalai Lama holds him in high esteem.

For years, the Indian government banned the Karmapa from going abroad and does not allow him to visit his sect's headquarters in exile in Sikkim. In 2008, he made his first trip to the United States, visiting New York and San Francisco, the first step toward a larger international profile. He speaks Chinese and Tibetan and some English and is a strict vegetarian, and a keen follower of Chinese culture, including religious texts and calligraphy.

In an interview in March, the Karmapa told the BBC's Chinese service that the talks were going nowhere because Beijing did not want to communicate. "We must wait until China is more open and more democratic and then the DL's 'Middle Way' will have an opportunity. I hope to solve the Tibetan problem in a quick and peaceful way and play a role in this."

He said that his decision to flee was his own and was because he found he had no freedom in his own temple or anywhere in Tibet. "I wanted to go to India to study from teachers but my application to leave China was repeatedly denied. I feared that, when I was 18, I would be appointed a vice chairman of the NPC or CPPCC and forced to criticize the Dalai Lama. Every Tibetan wants to return home one day. I am very hopeful of that day."

While Beijing was enraged at his escape to India, it considers him a better interlocutor than the Dalai Lama. He is a man who grew up under Chinese rule and understands intimately the Chinese position. He does not have the historical responsibility of the Dalai

Lama, who led his people into exile in 1959. On his slender shoulders may rest the future of his homeland.

China arrests monks after protest over missing lama

By Jane Macartney

Times Online (22.03.2009) / HRWF (25.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Chinese police have detained nearly 100 people, mostly monks, after an angry crowd besieged a police station to protest the disappearance of a fellow lama, making the first major outburst of Tibetan unrest since last year.

Many of those outside the police station wept and shouted slogans. Monks and local Tibetan residents surrounded the station for hours, some sitting cross-legged on the ground, crying out: "Love live the Dalai Lama."

The new eruption of anger demonstrates how volatile the situation remains in Tibetan-populated areas of China since peaceful demonstrations by monks last March triggered a violent riot in the Himalayan capital, Lhasa. On March 14 last year, Tibetans rampaged through the streets demanding the return of the Dalai Lama and independence for the region. They set fire to office and shops and left 22 people dead, most of them ethnic Han Chinese.

Thousands of troops and paramilitary have been deployed across Tibetan areas and all foreigners banned as China has tried to prevent a renewed outbreak of last year's protests that spread swiftly from Lhasa to dozens of Tibetan monasteries and communities.

This latest protest began when monks furious at the detention and disappearance of one of their number poured out of the 18th century Ragya monastery that overlooks the Yellow River and surrounded the police station on Saturday, state media said. The official Xinhua news agency put the number of protesters at several hundred.

It said they assaulted police and government staff, leaving several people slightly hurt. The authorities finally persuaded the last 30 protesters to disperse in the early hours of Sunday.

The report said the crowd had been deceived by rumours concerning Tashi Sangwu, who had been detained on suspicion of advocating Tibet independence. There were conflicting reports about what had happened to him.

Police and witnesses told Chinese media that he fled after asking to use the bathroom. He was seen swimming in the Yellow River, apparently to try to escape.

A report on the phayul.com website managed by exiled Tibetans said the monk jumped into the Yellow River to commit suicide after escaping the police. Tibetan exiles said the 28-year-old monk was being questioned after he unfurled a banned Tibetan flag on the roof of the monastery on March 10 - the 50th anniversary of an abortive uprising in Lhasa against Chinese rule that forced the Dalai Lama to flee into exile in India. He also distributed pamphlets in the street, urging unified protest against Beijing.

Six people had been detained and another 89 had turned themselves in to the authorities after the protest outside the police station, Chinese media said. All but two were monks from the Ragya monastery and they were undergoing interrogation.

Tibetan sources in the region told The Times that hundreds of people, including local herdsmen as well as lamas, staged a sit-in outside the police station. They shouted slogans demanding Tibetan independence and many wept, saying police had forced the missing monk to take his own life in the nearby fast-flowing river.

One source said: "Now the whole town is filled with armed police. They are patrolling the streets and there is no way to find out what is going on now. It is cut off."

The security clampdown has so far prevented major demonstrations, although small pockets of protests have been reported by Tibetan rights groups. Details were hard to come by since communications are poor in those areas with mobile phone services and some Internet links suspended. Most residents are afraid to talk for fear of official retribution.

Tibetan monk 'shot' while on fire

BBC (28.02.2009) / HRWF (03.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A Tibetan monk has been shot after setting fire to himself during a protest at Beijing's rule, reports say.

The incident happened in the Tibetan-populated town of Aba in southwest China's Sichuan province during a gathering of more than 1,000 monks.

The monk, named Tapey, is said to have shouted slogans and waved a Tibetan flag, then used petrol to start a fire.

Campaign groups said witnesses then saw Chinese police shoot the man.

Banned meeting

The monk collapsed and was taken away by the police.

China's official Xinhua news agency confirmed a man had set himself on fire, saying he was taken to a hospital and treated for burns injuries. It made no mention of any gunshot wounds.

The protest began after more than 1,000 Tibetan Buddhist monks gathered at a temple in the town to celebrate the third day of the Tibetan new year.

Chinese officials had earlier banned the gathering.

After the incident, news agencies reported a heavy police presence on the streets of the town.

"There are many policemen on patrol in the street and all of them have guns," an employee at a teahouse in Aba told the AFP news agency.

It is extremely difficult to independently confirm any information coming out of Tibetan areas.

China's authorities have restricted access to the region.

Next month marks the 50th anniversary of the escape into exile of the Dalai Lama and China wants to make sure there are no Tibetan protests in support of the exiled spiritual leader like those of a year ago, says the BBC's James Reynolds in Beijing.

More than 200 Tibetans are thought to have been killed in a Chinese crackdown in the region, which it has ruled since an invasion in 1950.

China claims Tibet is part of its historic territory, but Tibetan groups in exile regard the invasion as a tragedy.

Underground bishop of Xiwanzi released after two and a half years in prison

AsiaNews (12.02.2009) / HRWF (16.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Leo Yao Liang, the underground bishop of Xiwanzi, was set free shortly before the Chinese new year. He had been taken away by the police on July 30, 2006. Government officials have nonetheless warned him that he may not perform his office as bishop, or preside at large-scale Church activities.

Bishop Yao, 85, is an unauthorized bishop, not recognized by the government and not a member of the Patriotic Association (PA). In all likelihood, he was arrested because the authorities discovered he had ordained priests without the supervision of the Patriotic Association.

While he was in prison, Bishop Yao was kept in various locations, always isolated from everyone else. Now the authorities are permitting him to see people, but he is not allowed to organize large assemblies. In Xiwanzi, the faithful were not even permitted to organize a celebration for his return.

The diocese of Xiwanzi (Hebei) is a diocese of the underground Church, with 15,000 faithful, about 260 kilometers north of Beijing, almost on the border with Inner Mongolia. For months the police, egged on by the PA, have been carrying out a campaign against priests and bishops of the unauthorized Church. According to local sources, there are still 20 faithful and two priests in prison, arrested for organizing demonstrations and sit-ins to free their bishop.

There are still two bishops from the area of Hebei - the region with the highest concentration of Catholics - being held by the police (in an unknown location):

Bishop James Su Zhimin (diocese of Baoding), 75. He was arrested in 1996 and disappeared. In November of 2003, he was seen at a hospital in Baoding, under police supervision, where he was treated for his heart and his eyes. But a few days later, he disappeared again.

Bishop Cosmas Shi Enxiang (diocese of Yixian), 86. Arrested on April 13, 2001. Bishop Shi, ordained bishop a 1982, he had been in prison for 30 years before that. He was arrested again in December of 1990, then released in 1993. He lived enforced isolation until his last arrest.

Tortured Christian lawyer arrested as officials deny abuses

Detailed evidence of human rights violations omitted from U.N. summary report

Compass Direct (11.02.2009) / HRWF (12.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A Christian defender of human rights in China - whom authorities

detained last week – detailed state-sponsored torture he suffered in 2007 in an open letter released on Monday (Feb. 9), the same day advocacy groups criticized a U.N. review of China’s treatment of Christians and other minorities for omitting serious abuses. While a Chinese delegate at the U.N. review asserted that China would never allow torture against religious members or other minorities, the open letter by Christian lawyer Gao Zhisheng – whom officials seized from his home in Shaanxi province on Feb. 4 – described 50 days of beatings and electric shocks on his mouth and genitals by state-sponsored thugs that left him desperate to die. China Aid Association (CAA) said it was authorized to release the letter, written on Nov. 28, 2007, while Gao was under house arrest in Beijing. Currently Gao’s whereabouts are unknown, according to CAA. Gao said his official captors – some of whom he recognized – referred to a report he had written earlier on the torture of Falun Gong members and warned him that he was about to experience the same treatment. They urinated on Gao and repeatedly prodded his body, mouth and genitals with electric shock batons. Other methods used were too graphic and “horrible” to describe, Gao said.

Chinese banknotes with “hidden” Falun Gong messages

AsiaNews (04.02.2009) / HRWF (06.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net – The banned Falun Gong spiritual movement is countering China’s official censorship by printing messages on real renminbi banknotes and putting them back into circulation to mark the 10th anniversary of its banning.

Messages are in fine print, and the ink colour is very close to the original colour of the money, usually Five and ten-yuan notes—only by closely looking at them can the message be noticed.

The messages defend the group’s beliefs and ask the central government to stop persecuting its members.

Many such banknotes were found, especially in Yunnan and Sichuan.

The movement preaches mediation and spiritual and physical self-improvement, but is considered “evil” and dangerous by the government, which outlawed it on 22 July 1999. Followers can end up in jail and any kind of proselytising by them is severely punished.

This is causing real problems to those who end up with them because if they try to spend these banknotes they might be accused of spreading the Falun Gong message. Some people have had banks refuse to take them even though they are real banknotes.

Falun Gong followers are very creative in trying to counter censorship in other ways as well. Many DVD sold by street vendors have had pro- Falun Gong propaganda messages inserted in the middle of otherwise ordinary movies.

Official sources from the group have reported that persecution in China is responsible for the death of more than 3,000 followers, the torture of another 63,000 and the arrest of many hundreds of thousands.

Officials in China grapple with spread of Christianity

Christians may face increased controls as government reacts to growth, public discontent

By Xu Mei

Compass Direct (04.02.2009) / HRWF (05.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Concerned by the growth of unregistered house church groups in an uncertain political and social climate, the Chinese government has ramped up efforts both to identify Christians and to portray Christianity as a subversive foreign force.

Sources told Compass that authorities in recent months have been quietly gathering data on church growth, with surveys at universities and workplaces pointedly asking whether respondents were Christians. The surveys seemed largely unconcerned about other religions.

At the same time, Communist Party officials have called meetings at various institutions in the capital to discuss supposed dangers of foreign religious influence. On Dec. 20 officials called a meeting at one of Beijing's most prestigious cultural colleges to lecture faculty members about such dangers. A Christian teacher forced to attend told Compass that the lecturers distorted historical facts to impress upon her and her colleagues that Buddhism, Daoism and Islam were "indigenous" and therefore safe. The teacher noted that Islam, having come from the Middle East, could hardly be regarded as indigenous to China, and that Buddhism originally came from India but later took on Chinese characteristics.

By contrast, the officials told the teachers that Protestantism and Roman Catholicism were foreign and hence potentially "subversive." Party members warned participants to be on guard against these faiths.

China's leaders have warned that 2009 will be marked by increased unrest and demonstrations as public anger mounts against increasing unemployment and corruption. Also disconcerting to the government is Charter 08, an online pro-democracy initiative launched in mid-December and signed by an increasing number of Chinese Netizens. It calls for an end to the one-party system, an independent court and freedom of speech. Many of the original signatories were well-known pro-democracy lawyers and intellectuals, but the list now includes computer technicians, construction workers and farmers.

In response to these signs and portents of unrest, the government has begun to increase political and social control. Christian leaders told Compass they did not feel a huge crackdown was necessarily imminent, but they said the overall political climate had become more tense and that this would almost certainly affect unregistered house church Christians.

House church leaders in Beijing told Compass that conditions now seemed even "tighter" than in the period leading up to the Olympic Games last August. In previous years Christians rented halls and conference rooms for large-scale Christmas events, but last year's Christmas celebrations were deliberately low-key.

A house church leader in a major northeastern city confirmed this general sense of caution. He added that he had seen an internal document leaked from the local Religious Affairs Bureau, dated in early January, which warned against "subversion" by supposedly hostile Christian forces from overseas.

The leaders were generally optimistic about the continuing work and growth of the church, with one Beijing pastor claiming more than 1,000 new converts were baptized last year in his group alone.

Mixed signals

Chinese officials last November had initiated talks with Protestant house church Christians, raising hopes for greater freedom.

Meetings organized partly by the China State Council's Research and Development Center brought together academics and lawyers, many of them house church members, and a delegation of six Protestant house church leaders from Beijing, Henan and Wenzhou. As the Times of London reported in January, however, no Catholic representatives were invited; the Communist Party remains in a political standoff with the Vatican. (See Compass Direct News, "Officials Reach Out to House Churches; Raids, Arrests Continue," Dec. 9, 2008.)

At the time, church leaders involved in the discussions were cautiously optimistic. Pastor Ezra Jin of Beijing's Zion Church told the Times, "The government ... has understood that the Protestant church is not an opposition force but a force for stability and harmony." He added that the government wanted to evaluate whether house churches posed a threat to the regime and to ask why they rejected the leadership of the Three Self Patriotic Movement, an official body appointed to oversee Protestant churches.

Despite these talks, house church raids and arrests have continued. On Jan. 16, Public Security Bureau officers forcibly removed pastor Zhang Mingxuan from fellow pastor Hua Huiqi's house in Beijing and put him on a bus to Henan province, warning him not to return, the China Aid Association (CAA) reported.

Zhang had gone to visit Hua's ailing father, Hua Zaichen. For years the elderly Hua and his wife, Shuang Shuying, have suffered harassment for their work with the unofficial church. Authorities have now denied Shuang, currently serving a two-year prison sentence, permission to visit her dying husband.

On Jan. 2, police raided a house church meeting in Urumqi, Xinjiang province, detaining 50 people. Later that day, 48 of them were released without charge; another was released after paying a 500 yuan (US\$73) fine, and the last was sentenced to 10 days of administrative detention, according to CAA.

On Dec. 3, 2008, members of the Taikang County Domestic Defense Protection Squad burst into a private home in Chuanhui district, Zhoukou municipality, Henan, and arrested 50 Christians gathered there, CAA reported. About 20 of the detainees were sentenced to 15 days of administrative detention while leaders Tang Houyong, Shu Wenxiang and Xie Zhenqi were sentenced to one year of labor and re-education.

Some house church Christians have become more vocal in their calls for justice and religious liberty. For example, following the district court's dismissal of a lawsuit on behalf of Tang Houyong and his companions, Tang's wife filed a motion to dismiss the Chief Justice of the court for violating legal procedures.

With the specter of serious political and social unrest looming before officials in the face of China's economic recession, such Christian protests could add to the government's unease over the growing number and influence of house church Christians.

Cult watchers reconsider

By Collin Hansen

Christianity Today (26.01.2009) / HRWF (27.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Two notable critics have changed their minds on the controversial "local churches" movement that follow the teachings of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee.

Hank Hanegraaff, president of the Christian Research Institute (CRI), and Gretchen Passantino Coburn, director of Answers in Action, each published their new support in a November booklet by the Defense and Confirmation Project, founded to rebut criticism of Nee and Lee.

Hanegraaff says the local churches fit neither the theological or sociological definition of cultic activity. (CRI published critiques in the 1970s that influenced other watchdog groups.) Passantino Coburn, who coauthored *The New Cults* with Walter Martin, writes passionately and personally about the "most significant reassessment from my career."

"If you are a parent, proud of your young adult offspring's seemingly overnight spiritual blossoming but afraid that he or she is going to crash and burn in spiritual chaos, let me reassure you," Passantino writes. "The local churches are a legitimate, theologically orthodox, spiritually faithful involvement by means of which you offspring can develop genuine Christian commitment and maturity. They are not a dangerous ensnarement of the Devil."

The booklet also includes a three-year-old statement from Fuller Theological Seminary. Three Fuller faculty members—president Richard Mouw, theology dean Howard Loewen, and systematic theology professor Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen—met five times face-to-face with influential local church figures to discuss their beliefs. The Fuller representatives cited several areas of special concern, "such as the Trinity, the mingling of divinity and humanity, deification, modalism, their interpretation and practice of the 'local' church, the divine and human natures of Christ, and their attitude toward believers outside their congregations."

Now, the Fuller statement says, its faculty and administration "unreservedly recommend that all Christian believers likewise extend to them the right hand of fellowship." As a result of the Fuller dialogue, representatives of the local churches and LSM editors published a 39-page statement of their teachings in January 2007. But LSM spokesman Chris Wilde said the document has not been widely distributed.

The movement Nee founded during the 1920s in China subsequently spread to the West. After Nee died in 1972 in a Communist jail, Lee became the group's most prominent teacher. He died in 1997. The local churches claim more than 30,000 U.S. adherents and over 800,000 in China. Two of the group's traits immediately strike many evangelicals as strange. First, churches affiliated with this movement take no name except a geographical marker, such as "the local church in Chicago." Second, the group has no authority structure.

Lee was also very critical of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, raising concerns that the local churches regarded themselves as the only legitimate Christians. His statements prompted 60 evangelical leaders (including Darrell Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary and Paige Patterson of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) to publish an open letter in January 2007 asking the local churches and their publishing service, Living Stream Ministry (LSM), to disavow Lee's doctrinal statements and criticism of evangelicals. Wilde said the local churches issued invitations to dialogue with each signatory but did not hear back from any.

As criticism has mounted, the local churches have sought help from other evangelicals. LSM was granted membership in the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, and exhibited at the International Christian Retailers Show. (LSM has also sued critics. In June 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear its appeal of a rejected \$136 million libel lawsuit against John Ankerberg and John Weldon, authors of *The Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*.)

But the group has not renounced Lee's most controversial teachings, and that's the key problem for critics such as Calvin Beisner, formerly of CRI.

Beisner faults Lee on a number of points, including two forms of modalism condemned by the early church's ecumenical councils, and said no critics who have changed their mind—including his sister, Passantino Coburn—have yet documented how former concerns about Lee were actually misrepresentations.

"Merely issuing doctrinal statements that are orthodox so far as they go but do not explicitly repudiate the contrary statements of Lee is not sufficient," Beisner said. "As Francis Schaeffer insisted again and again, in our postmodern world we must not only say what we believe, but also must deny what we don't believe. The Worldwide Church of God set a good example in the 1980s, repudiating the heretical teachings of its founder Herbert W. Armstrong, and it is not asking the Local Church too much to do the same."

But Hanegraaff says members of the local churches demonstrate theological acumen: "I have witnessed in them a keen interest in doctrinal precision sadly missing today in major segments of the evangelical community."

Passantino Coburn says the group's remaining critics should engage in deeper research. She said that further reading about the group's teachings revealed connections with persecuted churches and ancient Eastern church history, such as a "less purely analytical but more fully personal theology."

"When I applied the templates of the persecuted church and Eastern church to the local churches, I saw that, regardless of their formal association or derivation, the similarities were unmistakable, understandable, and fully within orthodoxy," she told Christianity Today. "This does not mean that I agree with every local church teaching, nor does it mean that I do theology like the local churches. But it does mean that I can more fully understand and appreciate that theology, and can be confident that while different, it is not heretical."

Beijing does not recognize domestic churches, and persecutes them

Last Christmas, there were demolitions of buildings and arrests of the faithful of domestic Christian churches, but the authorities are trying to pass everything off in silence

AsiaNews/Agencies (16.01.2009) / HRWF (21.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - There's no letup to the repression against the Chinese "domestic churches," Christian groups not recognized by the authorities that meet in residences to pray. The government is telling them to ask for "recognition," but the faithful claim that they are being used as a pretext not to admit even their existence, and to continue arrests and the demolition of buildings.

Attorney Wu Chenglian of Zhoukou (Henan) has been hired to appeal against the sentences for Shu Wenxiang, Xie Zhenji, and Tang Houyong. They are leaders of unrecognized "domestic churches" arrested in December in the county of Taikang while they were conducting "proselytism," sentenced to a year of "reeducation through labor," genuine forced labor, with three months to make an appeal.

Wu explains that he has not yet succeeded in doing so, because the authorities are not accepting his case, saying that "they are acting on internal documents ordering them not to accept cases involving religious groups," and specific authorizations are required. But

the offices are trying to shrug off the responsibility of releasing them. Wu tells Radio Free Asia, "we went to the head of the court, and he said we could ask the director. When we asked the director, he told us we should ask the head of the court."

The authorities actively persecute these groups, but they are careful not to do this in an official way. In Yucheng (Henan), 4 women have been arrested and sentenced to 15 days in jail for "organizing illegal religious activities" (they gathered the faithful to pray). They were released after serving the sentence, but Zhang Mingxuan, president of the association of Chinese domestic churches, says that "they have been given no official documentation regarding their detention, because they are afraid that our members will sue them."

The Fuyin Drug Rehabilitation Center in Yunnan, run by Protestant groups, was forcibly demolished at the end of December, with bulldozers and excavators. But Pastor Lin says that he was not given any official documents. Now "the people who were receiving treatment at the center now have nowhere to go, and they are living on the demolition site in tents."

Nor is there any letup in the persecution of those already in prison. The group ChinaAid says that the Christian Hua Zaichen, 91, is dying and is asking to see his wife Shuang Shuying, 79 (in the photo), who is in prison for a sentence that ends on February 9. The two have been persecuted for years for their Christian work on behalf of other persecuted people, and as the parents of the Protestant pastor Hua Huiqi, who is also in prison.

ChinaAid says that the authorities have responded to the wife that this is not possible, but that if he dies she "would be allowed to see his body for 10 minutes and would have to be chained, handcuffed and shackled and wearing her prisoner uniform." In February of 2007, while she was going to the police to ask for news about her son, she was almost run over by a car. She held her cane out in front of her and the car struck it. She was sentenced to 2 years in prison for this.

51 Christians detained in Xinjiang: one young mother sentenced

China Aid (05.01.2009) / HRWF (06.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - At 1 p.m. local time on January 2, 2009, a house church in Shayibake District of Urumqi city, Xinjiang Autonomous Region was raided by a number of Public Security Bureau (PSB) officers. Fifty-one Christians were detained for questioning, with forty-eight released later that day.

Authorities held three church leaders, Ms. Zhou Li, Ms. Zhu Jinfeng and Mr. Yang Miaofa, an extended time in PSB custody. Mr. Yang Miaofa was released after paying 500 yuan fine. Ms. Zhu Jinfeng suffered a longer detention before her eventual release. Ms. Zhou Li was sentenced to 10 days administrative detention. She is currently separated from her son who is almost two years old.

Contact the following Chinese government offices to express your concern for Zhou Li.

ChinaAid recommends English speakers to communicate by fax:

The People's Procurate of Xinjiang Autonomous Region
Tel: +86-991-2642000
The Office of Inspector General for Law Enforcement of China
Tel: +86-10-62251925

Fax: +86-10-62254181
