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As more than 400 crosses are destroyed in Zhejiang, violence spreads to Henan, Shandong, and Anhui

Asia News (23.12.2014) - In the latest incident of its kind, the cross of a Protestant Church in Dingqiao was torn down on 19 December. Some members of the local congregation were injured trying to stop the destruction. On 18 December, the cross of a church of Nanle (Henan) was also destroyed and 4 million yuan saved by parishioners to build more churches were seized. The "Three Rectifications and One Demolition" campaign targets mainly sacred buildings.

In Dingqiao, more than 100 people, including members of the Religious Affairs Bureau and demolition workers, clashed with members of a local congregation who, in a futile attempt, tried to stop the destruction. Some of the faithful were injured and are still recovering in hospital.

The campaign against crosses and Christian buildings began earlier this year, when Zhejiang party secretary Xia Baolong said that one could see too "too many crosses" in Wenzhou City's skyline.

Local Catholics believe that the real reason behind the campaign is a desire to reduce the impact and influence of Christian communities, both official and underground, on Chinese society because their numbers are rising exponentially through conversions.

Another reason behind the campaign is that provincial authorities last year launched a major development plan for 2020. Under the guise of "beautifying" the province, they are tearing down buildings they have deemed illegal.

The campaign is called "Three Rectifications and One Demolition", indicating the percentage of buildings that should be torn down to free up land for further real estate development.

In view of this, the provincial government claims that it ordered the demolition of buildings belonging to all communities and various individuals without any discrimination.

However, the campaign has singled out mainly Christian sites, even those built with all necessary permits and already approved by the government.

Over the past few months, the campaign has spread to other provinces, including Shandong, Anhui and Henan.

In Henan, the cross on a church in Nanle was destroyed on 18 December. The place of worship, built with all the duly signed permits, has been at the centre of a tug of war.

Local authorities have seized land owned by the church and its pastor, Rev Zhang Shaojie, was sentenced to 12 years in prison.

The Religious Affairs Bureau also seized 4 million yuan (about US\$ 650,000) from a bank account held by the congregation with funds raised among the faithful for the possible new construction of sacred buildings.

In recent months, the official bishop of Wenzhou and the priests of the diocese have also appealed to the government to stop demolitions and the destruction of crosses because they are increasing social instability in China.

China bans religion in Xinjiang, plans to fine offenders

Today's Zaman (30.11.2014) - China's Xinjiang region has banned the practice of religion in government buildings and will fine those who use the Internet to "undermine national unity," in a package of regulations aimed at "combating separatism" in the north-western province.

The rules, passed by the standing committee of Xinjiang's parliament on Friday, stipulate penalties of between 5,000 and 30,000 yuan (\$4,884) for individuals who use the Internet, mobile phones or digital publishing to undermine national unity, social stability or incite ethnic hatred.

Equipment used in the offenses also can be confiscated, the official Xinhua News Agency reported on Sunday.

The regulations, which come into effect Jan. 1, also prohibit people from distributing and viewing videos about jihad, or holy war, religious extremism and terrorism in or outside religious venues, and requires religious leaders to report such activities to the local authorities and police, the China Daily reported at the weekend.

"An increasing number of problems involving religious affairs have emerged in Xinjiang," said Ma Mingcheng, deputy director of the Xinjiang People's Congress and director of its legislative affairs committee, according to the Chinese newspaper.

People will not be allowed to practice religion in government offices, public schools, businesses or institutions. Religious activities will have to take place in registered venues, the report said.

They also are prohibited from wearing or forcing others to wear clothes or logos associated with religious extremism, although the types of clothes and logos aren't specified, the newspaper said.

The most recent example of violence in the restive province came on Friday.

Fifteen people were killed and 14 injured when a group in Shache county in Xinjiang threw explosives into a crowded street where vendors were selling food, Xinhua reported on Saturday.

In March, knife-wielding militants from Xinjiang killed 31 people and injured 141 at the Kunming railway station in southwest Yunnan province in what the government called a premeditated attack.

Cracks in the atheist edifice

The Economist (01.11.2014) - The coastal city of Wenzhou is sometimes called China's Jerusalem. Ringed by mountains and far from the capital, Beijing, it has long been a haven for a religion that China's Communist leaders view with deep unease: Christianity. Most cities of its size, with about 9m people, have no more than a dozen or so visibly Christian buildings. Until recently, in Wenzhou, hundreds of crosses decorated church roofs.

This year, however, more than 230 have been classed as "illegal structures" and removed. Videos posted on the internet show crowds of parishioners trying to form a human shield around their churches. Dozens have been injured. Other films show weeping believers defiantly singing hymns as huge red crosses are hoisted off the buildings. In April one of Wenzhou's largest churches was completely demolished. Officials are untroubled by the clash between the city's famously freewheeling capitalism and the Communist Party's ideology, yet still see religion and its symbols as affronts to the party's atheism.

Christians in China have long suffered persecution. Under Mao Zedong, freedom of belief was enshrined in the new Communist constitution (largely to accommodate Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists in the west of the country). Yet perhaps as many as half a million Christians were harried to death, and tens of thousands more were sent to labour camps. Since the death of Mao in 1976, the party has slowly allowed more religious freedom. Most of the churches in Wenzhou are so-called "Three Self" churches, of which there are about 57,000 round the country. These, in the official jargon, are self-supporting, self-governed and self-propagating (therefore closed to foreign influence). They profess loyalty to China, and are registered with the government. But many of those in Wenzhou had obviously incurred official displeasure all the same; and most of the Christians who survived Maoist persecution, along with many new believers, refuse to join such churches anyway, continuing to meet in unregistered "house churches", which the party for a long time tried to suppress.

Christianity is hard to control in China, and getting harder all the time. It is spreading rapidly, and infiltrating the party's own ranks. The line is blurring between house churches and official ones, and Christians are starting to emerge from hiding to play a more active part in society. The Communist Party has to find a new way to deal with all this. There is even talk that the party, the world's largest explicitly atheist organisation, might follow its sister parties in Vietnam and Cuba and allow members to embrace a dogma other than-even higher than-that of Marx.

Any shift in official thinking on religion could have big ramifications for the way China handles a host of domestic challenges, from separatist unrest among Tibetan Buddhists and Muslim Uighurs in the country's west to the growth of NGOs and "civil society"-grassroots organisations, often with a religious colouring, which the party treats with suspicion, but which are also spreading fast.

Safety in numbers

The upsurge in religion in China, especially among the ethnic Han who make up more than 90% of the population, is a general one. From the bullet trains that sweep across the Chinese countryside, passengers can see new churches and temples springing up everywhere. Buddhism, much longer established in China than Christianity, is surging too, as is folk religion; many more Han are making pilgrimages to Buddhist shrines in search of spiritual comfort. All this worries many officials, for whom religion is not only Marx's "opium of the people" but also, they believe, a dangerous perverter of loyalty away from the party and the state. Christianity, in particular, is associated with 19th-century Western imperial encroachment; and thus the party's treatment of Christians offers a sharp insight into the way its attitudes are changing.

It is hard even to guess at the number of Christians in China. Official surveys seek to play down the figures, ignoring the large number who worship in house churches. By contrast, overseas Christian groups often inflate them. There were perhaps 3m Catholics and 1m Protestants when the party came to power in 1949. Officials now say there are between 23m and 40m, all told. In 2010 the Pew Research Centre, an American polling organisation, estimated there were 58m Protestants and 9m Catholics. Many experts, foreign and Chinese, now accept that there are probably more Christians than there are members of the 87m-strong Communist Party. Most are evangelical Protestants.

Predicting Christianity's growth is even harder. Yang Fenggang of Purdue University, in Indiana, says the Christian church in China has grown by an average of 10% a year since 1980. He reckons that on current trends there will be 250m Christians by around 2030, making China's Christian population the largest in the world. Mr Yang says this speed of growth is similar to that seen in fourth-century Rome just before the conversion of Constantine, which paved the way for Christianity to become the religion of his empire.

In the 1980s the faith grew most quickly in the countryside, stimulated by the collapse of local health care and a belief that Christianity could heal instead. In recent years it has been burgeoning in cities. A new breed of educated, urban Christians has emerged. Gerda Wielander of the University of Westminster, in her book "Christian Values in Communist China", says that many Chinese are attracted to Christianity because, now that belief in Marxism is declining, it offers a complete moral system with a transcendental source. People find such certainties appealing, she adds, in an age of convulsive change.

Some Chinese also discern in Christianity the roots of Western strength. They see it as the force behind the development of social justice, civil society and rule of law, all things they hope to see in China. Many new NGOs are run by Christians or Buddhists. There are growing numbers of Christian doctors and academics. More than 2,000 Christian schools are also dotted around China, many of them small and all, as yet, illegal.

One civil-rights activist says that, of the 50 most-senior civil-rights lawyers in China, probably half are Christians. Some of them have set up the Association of Human Rights Attorneys for Chinese Christians. Groups of well-paid urban Christian lawyers join together to defend Christians-and others-in court.

Missionaries have begun to go out from China to the developing world.

The authorities have responded to this in different ways. In places like Wenzhou, they have cracked down. Implementation of religious policy is often left to local officials. Some see toughness as a way of displaying loyalty to the central leadership. Mr Yang of Purdue University says there are rumours in Wenzhou that the crackdown there is partly the result of a local leader's efforts to win favour with President Xi Jinping.

China Aid, an American church group, says that last year more than 7,400 Christians suffered persecution in China. And there is still plenty of less visible discrimination. But 7,400 people are less than 0.01% of all Chinese Christians. Even if the figure is higher, in this century "persecution is clearly no longer the norm", says Brent Fulton of ChinaSource, a Christian group in Hong Kong.

That is largely because many officials see advantages in Christianity's growth. Some wealthy business folk in Wenzhou have become believers-they are dubbed "boss Christians"-and have built large churches in the city. One holds evening meetings at which businessmen and women explain "biblical" approaches to making money. Others form groups encouraging each other to do business honestly, pay taxes and help the poor. Rare is the official anywhere in China who would want to scare away investors from his area.

In other regions local leaders lend support, or turn a blind eye, because they find that Christians are good citizens. Their commitment to community welfare helps to reinforce precious stability. In some large cities the government itself is sponsoring the construction of new Three Self churches: Chongyi church, in Hangzhou, can seat 5,000 people. Three Self pastors are starting to talk to house-church leaders; conversely, house-church leaders (often correctly) no longer consider official churches to be full of party stooges.

In recent years the party's concerns have shifted from people beliefs to the maintenance of stability and the party's monopoly of power. If working with churches helps achieve these aims, it will do so, even though it still frets about encouraging an alternative source of authority. In 2000 Jiang Zemin, then party chief, and himself a painter of calligraphy for his local Buddhist temples, said in an official speech that religion would probably still be around when concepts of class and state had vanished.

Increasingly, the party needs the help of religious believers. It is struggling to supply social services efficiently; Christian and Buddhist groups are willing, and able, to help. Since about 2003, religious groups in Hong Kong have received requests from mainland government officials to help set up NGOs and charities. In an age of hedonism and corruption, selfless activism has helped the churches' reputation; not least, it has persuaded the regime that Christians are not out to overthrow it. For the Catholic church, though, the situation is trickier: allegiance to Rome is still seen by some officials as a sign of treachery.

Ms Wielander says she does not believe the flock will go on growing by 10% year in, year out. But she admits that the party is now paying more attention to the increasing religiosity of ordinary Chinese. So, in some areas, it is modifying its attitude and official rhetoric (while keeping intense pressure on Buddhist Tibetans and Muslim Uighurs, whose religious beliefs are seen to threaten the integrity of the state). In May last year the head of the Russian Orthodox church was welcomed by Mr Xi in Beijing, the first such foreign church leader to meet China's party chief.

Now is the time for all good men...

When the Communist Party allowed entrepreneurs to join in 2001, some voices suggested that it should also allow religious believers to do so. Pan Yue, a reformist official, wrote a newspaper article to that effect entitled, "The religious views of the Communist Party must keep up with the times". One influence was the decision of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1990 to allow its members to be religious believers. The move went smoothly, and may even have helped to stabilise Vietnam after its turbulent recent past. In China, however, Mr Pan's idea was ignored.

One Chinese article in 2004 claimed that 3m-4m party members had become Christians. Despite that, the party still has doubts about officially admitting them. Recent pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong are likely to reinforce those fears: some of the organisers were Christians. It worries the regime that the growth of house churches may also provide more room for the growth of quasi-Christian cults, which may then-like the banned Falun Gong movement-become politicised, and turn anti-Communist. The party's fear of such cults is rooted in history. The Taiping rebellion in the mid-19th century, led by a man calling himself the brother of Jesus, resulted in more than 20m deaths.

But some officials are becoming more discerning in their crackdowns. This has been evident in Beijing where, around 2005, two large house churches began renting office space for their Sunday services. The largest, Shouwang church, was led by Jin Tianming, a graduate of Beijing's elite Tsinghua University. It drew an intellectual crowd from the university district. On some Sundays up to 1,000 people attended services.

Parishioners could download sermons from the church's website. Mr Jin was known to be quietly arguing for more religious freedom. He tried to register Shouwang as a legal but independent congregation, not under the control of the official church, but was turned down. In 2009, just before a visit by America's president, Barack Obama, the government forced the landlord of the building to terminate the church's lease. Mr Jin took his congregation into a nearby park, where they worshipped in the snow. He and the church elders were placed under house arrest and many parishioners were detained. They had crossed a political red line.

It is a different story on the other side of Beijing. In an office building just off the third ring road another unregistered congregation, known as Zion church, meets in a similar venue; its pastor, Jin Mingri, is a graduate of Peking University. Like Shouwang, Zion covers an entire floor and includes a bookshop and a café offering loyalty cards to coffee-drinkers. The main hall holds 400 people. It looks and feels like a church in suburban

America. Zion's pastors preach equally uncompromising evangelical sermons, yet the church remains open because it is more cautious in how it engages with sensitive issues.

The pastors of both churches (and the leader of Shanghai's largest house church, before it was closed, like Shouwang, in 2010) are members of China's 2.3m-strong ethnic Korean minority, who see the Christianisation of South Korea as a model for China to follow. Both pastors came of age during-and took part in the Tiananmen protests of 1989, the crushing of which led to their disillusionment with the party and the spiritual search that led to their conversion. Yet officials in Beijing, so far, feel they can cohabit with one of them at least.

At the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences one man, Liu Peng, is trying to assist the process. Mr Liu recommended a moderate line to defuse the standoff with Shouwang. A certificate in his office confirms that China's then president, Hu Jintao, acted on his advice; by the standards of crackdowns on dissent, the one on Shouwang church was mild.

Mr Liu, a Christian himself, is now, on his own initiative, drafting a document that he hopes will become the country's first law on religion. At present religion is governed only by administrative regulations; such a law might make it more difficult for officials to crack down arbitrarily. Mr Liu says the party should allow its members to be believers, since an age of toleration would benefit the party as well as the churches. There should be a "religious free market". But he admits that this, like a law, is a long way off.

Meanwhile, acts of defiance are increasing. A mid-ranking official in a big city was recently told that her Christian faith, which was well known in the office, was not compatible with her party membership and she would have to give it up. She politely told her superiors that she would not be able to do that, and that her freedom of belief was protected by the Chinese constitution. She was not fired, but sent on a remedial course at a party school. She is now back at her job, and says her colleagues often come to her asking for prayer.

Christians are becoming more socially (and sometimes politically) engaged, too. Wang Yi is a former law professor and prolific blogger who became a Christian in 2005. The next year he was one of three house-church Christians who met President George W. Bush at the White House. Mr Wang is now pastor of Early Rain, a house church in the south-western city of Chengdu. On June 1st this year, International Children's Day, he and members of his congregation were detained for distributing leaflets opposing China's one-child policy and the forced abortions it leads to.

In 2013 a group of Chinese intellectuals convened a conference in Oxford which brought together, for the first time, thinkers from the New Left, whose members want to retain some of the egalitarian parts of Maoism; the New Confucians, who want to promote more of China's traditional philosophical thinking; and the New Liberals, classic economic and political liberals. For the first time Christian intellectuals were included as well. The gathering produced a document, called the Oxford Consensus, emphasising that the centre of the Chinese nation is the people, not the state; that culture should be pluralistic; and that China must always behave peacefully towards others. This was not overtly Christian, but it was significant that Christian intellectuals had been included. A summary of the meeting was published in an influential Chinese newspaper, *Southern People*, and most participants continue to live freely, if cautiously, in China.

The paradox, as they all know, is that religious freedom, if it ever takes hold, might harm the Christian church in two ways. The church might become institutionalised, wealthy and hence corrupt, as happened in Rome in the high Middle Ages, and is already happening a little in the businessmen's churches of Wenzhou. Alternatively the church, long strengthened by repression, may become a feebler part of society in a climate of

toleration. As one Beijing house-church elder declared, with a nod to the erosion of Christian faith in western Europe: "If we get full religious freedom, then the church is finished."

China sentences 12 to death for July attack in Xinjiang region

Ecumenical news (01.11.2014) - A court in China has sent 12 people to the gallows for their involvement in the July attack that left 96 people dead in the Xinjiang region, seen by many as the worst act of violence seen there this year.

Uighur exiles based overseas cast suspicion on the verdict, which also saw 15 others receiving suspended death sentences, saying security forces used heavy-handed means to restore order that led to the high death toll.

Citing a report from State broadcaster China Central Television, al-Jazeera news agency said the verdict was issued, nearly three months after one of the worst acts of violence in the area occurred.

In July, attackers stormed government buildings and police stations, wielding knives and axes. The simultaneous attacks in the government facilities claimed the lives of 37 civilians.

Security forces responded with heavy fire and killed 59 of the attackers who struck government buildings.

The sentencing of those convicted is part of a stepped-up campaign by authorities in China to further deter violence in Xinjiang province, a region inhabited by Uighur Muslims who are the minority there.

Harper's trip to China could be good news for Falun Gong practitioners

Huffington Post (31.10.2014) - Oct. 30 marked the 15-year anniversary of a resolution on Article 300 of China's criminal code. This resolution detailed the punishments for crimes 'committed by cults' and resulted in the Falun Gong becoming a banned organization in China.

In 1999, the Falun Gong reportedly organized thousands of Chinese citizens to silently protest at Tiananmen Square. The speed, organization, and numbers reportedly surprised the Chinese leadership, and likely resulted in their crackdown. To this day, Falun Gong remains a particularly sensitive issue for the Chinese. On the website of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Canada, of the 19 items under Spokesperson's Remarks since 2004, 5 (26%) relate to the Falun Gong (2004-2007), followed closely behind by references to the Dalai Lama/Tibetan issues (4) and espionage allegations (4).

The People's Republic of China describes the Falun Gong as "very good at concocting lies", using "rumour-mongering and mudslinging". The Chinese government expressed hope that more Canadians will become "aware of the nature of Falun Gong as an evil cult".

Despite these claims, Canada was one of the few countries to call on the People's Republic of China to stop the "arbitrary detention" and "persecution" of Falun Gong practitioners when China appeared before the UN Human Rights Councils Universal Periodic Review in 2009 and in 2013. In fact, there have been various references to the Falun Gong, both domestically and internationally, by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Parliamentary Secretaries, and at the official's level. In launching the Office of Religious Freedom in 2013, Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a poignant reference to the repression that occurs in China, including those affecting Falun Gong practitioners.

Despite their relatively small numbers in Canada (likely only in the thousands), practitioners of the Falun Gong and their supporters have been very active, even getting meetings with multiculturalism minister Jason Kenney. Parliament's Subcommittee on International Human Rights also heard from individuals on the issue of organ transplants and the treatment of Falun Gong members. Back in 2005, it was reported that Falun Gong was the third most frequent subject of correspondence to the Prime Minister's Office. Both Prime Ministers Martin and Chretien reportedly raised Falun Gong issues.

Prime Minister Harper's trip to China in November for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings presents a potential opportunity for him to raise (again) the difficulties faced by Falun Gong practitioners and their supporters. More specifically, he could raise the case of human rights defender Gao Zhisheng. Gao, a Chinese national, was once a practising lawyer in China. He became an outspoken critic of the Chinese regime, and campaigned for religious freedom, including those of the Falun Gong. He then disappeared and there were allegations he was brutally tortured. Although he is now currently under house arrest, there are growing calls in the United States for Gao to be allowed to join his family (who are in the United States) for medical treatment.

Canada has publicly raised his case in the past. In 2010, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs mentioned Gao in a statement in the House of Commons. Earlier this year, a statement from Canada's Ambassador to China called on China to end the unjust detention of Gao.

Although there will be many economic and other bilateral issues to discuss during the Prime Minister's visit, and time in meetings will always be limited, this could be an opportune time for Canada, at the highest level, to raise Gao's case directly with the Chinese leadership.

USCIRF Condemns arrest of Chinese Buddhist leader Wu Zeheng and detention and mistreatment of religious leaders

USCIRF (30.10.2014) - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) condemns the recent formal arrest of Wu Zeheng, also known as Buddhist Zen Master Shi Xingwu, and more than a dozen of his followers. They were charged under the highly problematic Article 300 of the Criminal Law of China that makes it a crime for anyone to form or use "superstitious sects or secret societies or weird religious organizations...to undermine the implementation of the laws and administrative rules and regulations of the State." If convicted, each could serve from seven years to life in prison. In practical terms, a formal arrest in China almost invariably leads to a conviction.

Wu is a Chinese Buddhist leader with millions of followers in China, Taiwan, and around the world. He was taken into custody in July, after more than 100 armed Chinese policemen staged a coordinated raid on several businesses and living compounds which his group, Huazang Dharma, operated. An estimated 50 people, including children, were detained in the raid.

"The arrest of Wu Zeheng escalates the Chinese government's campaign against organized religions," said Katrina Lantos Swett, USCIRF Chair. "We urge the government to reverse course, release Wu Zeheng, and begin living up to its legal obligation to ensure that its citizens are guaranteed their fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief as provided by both Article 36 of the Chinese Constitution and international law."

Wu's indictment is part of the Chinese government's broader nationwide crackdown on organized religion, which has accelerated with the expansion of religious observance in China. The government views vibrant faith communities as threatening its authority and ability to control its citizens. Even adherents of China's five officially sanctioned religions - Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism - along with religions that the government has not sanctioned, have been targeted. The government has persecuted, intimidated, and jailed religious leaders, especially those with significant followings like Wu, who also has been targeted for being an alleged "evil cult" leader.

The Chinese government long has vilified the Falun Gong and its practitioners, including Wang Zhiwen, who recently finished a 15-year prison sentence during which time he was tortured, followed by detention in a "brainwashing center." Despite his release from prison, Wang now will be stripped of all political rights for four years. Other Falun Gong prisoners, Li Chang, Yu Changxin, and Ji Liewu, remain imprisoned. China's Christian leaders also have been targeted, with many Christian prisoners of conscience detained, including Ms. Yang Rongli and her husband, leaders of a 50,000 member house church in Shaanxi province; Alimujiang Yimiti, a Uighur Christian; and Zhang Shaojie, a pastor in Henan province.

The Chinese government also actively represses the religious practices of Uighur Muslims, especially in the autonomous region of Xinjiang, and has imprisoned Uighur prisoners of conscience including Ilham Tohti who received a life sentence in September 2014 for "separatism." Religious freedom conditions in Tibetan areas remain acute, given the Chinese government's efforts to control Tibetan's religious practice and culture and its detention of senior monks and other leaders including Tenzin Delek and Lobsang Tsering.

In its 2014 Annual Report, USCIRF stated that "The Chinese government continues to perpetrate particularly severe violations of religious freedom," and again recommended that China be designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC). USCIRF has recommended CPC status for China since the Commission first made recommendations in 2000. The State Department has designated China as a CPC since 1999. For more information on religious freedom conditions in China see the [2014 Annual Report](#).

China to tighten laws to combat illegal cults

Reuters (28.10.2014) - China will tighten the law to impose harsher punishments on people participating in illegal cults, a state-run newspaper said on Tuesday, after a brutal murder earlier in the year.

An amendment to the law will mandate prison terms of up to seven years for those who organize or make use of a religious institution or cult to spread "superstitions to undermine national laws or regulations", the official China Daily said.

The death penalty will be imposed for crimes which cause death or serious injuries, it added.

China currently has no specific laws relating to cults, the newspaper said.

"If the revised law comes into force, it will provide a formal legal basis for judicial organs to prosecute and handle cult-related crimes," it quoted legal official Li Shishi as saying.

Earlier this month a Chinese court sentenced two members of a banned religious cult to death for the murder in a McDonald's restaurant of a woman who refused an apparent attempt by the group to recruit her.

The 37-year-old woman, surnamed Wu, was attacked in May in the eastern province of Shandong by members of Quannengshen, the Church of Almighty God, which had preached that a global apocalypse would take place in 2012.

The case sparked a national outcry after it was revealed that Wu was beaten to death for refusing to give her telephone number to members of the group.

China's ruling Communist party brooks no challenge to its rule and is obsessed with social stability. It has cracked down on cults, which have multiplied in recent years. Demonstrations have been put down with force and some sect leaders executed.

In 1999, then-President Jiang Zemin launched a campaign to crush the Falun Gong religious group. It was banned as an "evil cult" after thousands of practitioners staged a surprise but peaceful sit-in outside the leadership compound in Beijing to demand official recognition of their movement.

Zhejiang demolitions: Cross destruction continues in Hangzhou, Wenzhou

China Aid Association (21.10.2014) - Churches in Wenzhou and Hangzhou, the capital of the Chinese coastal Zhejiang province, reported cross demolitions on Friday; some Christians told China Aid that only one cross is still standing in the heavily persecuted Wenzhou area.

"On [Friday], the cross of [Kaiyang Church] of Wuniu pastoral region in Yongjia County, Wenzhou was taken down," a worshipper from Pingyang County, Wenzhou said. "[The cross on] a church in Ouhai District, Wenzhou was also taken down. Now, in Pingyang County, only the cross of Zengzhan Church has not been taken down."

Local Christians said that more than 300 security agents surrounded Kaiyang Church in Yongjia County between 2-3 a.m. on Friday. While some guards blocked the roads leading to the church, others climbed over the church's wall and opened the gate. Thirty of the officers stood guard over the gate while the remainder entered the church where they removed a middle-aged woman who had been guarding the church and then proceeded to the church's cross. At 3:30 a.m., a crane removed the church's red cross and set it on the ground, after which, the security agents left.

Believers reported that Shatantou Church's cross in Ouhai District, Wenzhou was demolished the same day.

"Only Zenshan Church's cross has not been taken down [in Pingyang County]," a worshipper said. "Believers from seven or eight pastoral regions in Pingyang are taking turns guarding the cross of Zengshan Church. Now, the only cross listed to be taken down in Pingyang County is Zengshan Church. As many as a hundred people are guarding the place."

The continuation of the "Three Rectifications and One Demolition" campaign has been in seen in Zhejiang's capital as well. Several hundred government officials converged on Sandun Church in the Xihu District of Hangzhou on Friday, according to Christians there.

"Now that all the crosses on either side of the highways are gone, why are they still taking down the crosses?" asked Zan Aizong, a freelance journalist and Christian in Hangzhou in reference to previous claims from the government that only churches near highways would be affected in the "beautification" campaign. "All these crosses belonged to Three-Self Patriotic Movement churches. Since they were registered, why do the authorities still want to take down their crosses?"

"The authorities in Zhejiang have never stopped taking down the crosses," Pastor Zhang Mingxuan, also known as Pastor "Bike," said. "They have been obstructing the entry of Christian culture into China. This is religious persecution. In taking down these crosses, they resort to violence."

Henan court rejects house church pastor's final appeal against 12-year sentence

China Aid (22.08.2014) <http://www.chinaaid.org/2014/08/henan-court-rejects-house-church.html> - China Aid learned today that Pastor Zhang Shaojie's final appeal against his 12-year sentence for "gathering a crowd to disrupt public order" and a fabricated fraud charge was rejected by the Puyang Intermediate Court in China's central Henan on Aug. 21.

Li Fangping, one of Zhang's attorneys, confirmed that he received a phone call from Judge Ma, who presided over the case, saying that the original verdict was being upheld. Ma told Li on Aug. 21 that the second verdict had already been sent to Zhang.

This decision came despite Li's official request that the Henan Provincial People's Court appoint a third court to conduct the second appeal trial for Zhang's case because the "Puyang Intermediate Court is already disqualified for its mishandling of the first trial," Li told China Aid. Li's request, made on Aug. 1, was never acknowledged.

"The only other procedure left to file is a judicial review," said China Aid founder and president Bob Fu.

"By issuing a verdict in a hastily-arranged, secret mock-trial against Pastor Zhang Shaojie, Henan authorities have delivered a new low for the rule of law in China," Fu said. "The continuing harassment and persecution against Pastor Zhang's family members and his church members shows the total disregard of religious freedom. We urge the Chinese authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Pastor Zhang and the other arrested church leader and restore the church's normal worship and other services."

Zhang was initially detained in November 2013, along with more than 20 fellow Nanle County Christian Church members. Since that time, many of the other believers have been released. While all but five, including Zhang, have been released, Zhang is the only believers to have been tried.

Zhang's oldest daughter, Zhang "Yunyun" Huixin, said she felt angry at the occurrence and result of the secret trial of second instance. "I think this is a typical case in which the local government is persecuting my father, other Christians' and our church with groundless charges," she said. "I will never give up my efforts in overseas countries to get my father released from prison on innocence, and I will fight until my father regains freedom."

"China Aid will never stop appealing for Nanle County Christian Church, Pastor Zhang Shaojie and the two other Christians, whose cases will soon be tried, until all the people here have gained their freedom," Fu said. "I call on the Chinese government to come back, in the true sense of the word, to the rule of law [governing] that President Xi [Jinping] proposed and to truly safeguard every citizen's right to religious freedom."

More than 10 house church leaders in Hunan province criminally detained

China Aid (22.08.2014) <http://www.chinaaid.org/2014/08/henan-court-rejects-house-church.html> - In what appears to be an ongoing operation, police in central China's Hunan province earlier this month put under criminal detention at least 10 leaders from multiple house churches in at least four different counties, according to local Christians.

They were among at least 15 pastors and lay leaders taken into police custody in a police action that began on Aug. 7 and appeared to be ongoing a week later. The criminal detention notice of the 10 said they had organized cults and sects and used superstition to undermine law enforcement. Criminal detention is the first step in the Chinese legal process to being formally charged with a crime, and a conviction is almost always inevitable.

The affected house churches were located in the counties of Longhui, Dongkou, Xinning and Wugang, all of them under the jurisdiction of the city of Shaoyang.

When China Aid reporter Qiao Nong spoke to local believers on Aug. 14, they said the police action appeared to be continuing, and appeared to have stemmed from an incident in which a Christian woman was handing out Gospel tracts and gave one to a government employee from a local police station. This employee followed some Christians to their meeting site, and then notified the police, who came and started taking people into custody.

While in custody, the Christians were interrogated by police, who questioned them closely about the bank passbooks they had with them. The police wanted to know where the money in the accounts had gone. When the Christians said the funds had been donated, the police wanted to know who the recipients of the donations were. In answering the question, the Christians gave the names of all the Christian leaders in Hunan province. The police roundup proceeded based on this name list, and those taken into custody were locked up in detention centers, a woman surnamed Yang told the China Aid reporter.

She said that once they had the names, "The entire police force was mobilized and they

went out to round them up. In addition, the personal bank accounts of the believers were frozen by the police who also took the cash in their homes. They also confiscated the churches' Bibles and other items, such as photocopies, computers, etc. After they seized these items, they not provide an inventory list. This was how they took people away and locked them up in detention centers."

"They were still rounding people up yesterday," Yang said on Aug. 14. "They have already taken about 15 people into custody." She said that at least two of them were taken from their homes, not from the venue where the believers had been meeting.

Based on information from multiple sources, the following five people from Longhui county were placed under criminal detention: Fan Tianying, Sun Jue, Hu Qingxi, Li Fenge and Luo Longjiang; four people from Dongku county have been taken to Shaoyang for a month of compulsory study, and the following six people, also from Dongku, have been placed under criminal detention: Liu Manxiu, Deng Xuexiang, Long Shijiang, Zeng Weiqing, Zeng Weigang and Yin Shiting.

"We urgently need the foreign media to report this incident. If they don't, the police will continue to arrest people," said a pastor who had supplied some of the names and details. He said that police took at least one person into custody without an arrest warrant or detention papers.

Pastor Zhang Shaojie loses appeal

CSW (22.08.2014) - Chinese Pastor Zhang Shaojie, who on 4 July was [sentenced](#) to 12 years in prison and fined 100,000 RMB (approximately £9,400) for fraud and "gathering a crowd to disturb public order", has lost his appeal.

On 21 August Li Fangping, one of Zhang's lawyers, received a phone call from the presiding judge, informing him that Puyang Intermediate Court was upholding the original ruling.

Lawyer Li had previously requested that the appeal trial be handled by another court, following accusations that Puyang Intermediate Court had mishandled the first trial. According to China Aid, Li's request was ignored and the appeal [trial](#) was conducted by Puyang Intermediate Court without the knowledge or presence of Zhang's lawyers.

Zhang Shaojie was the pastor of Nanle County Christian Church in Henan, which belongs to the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement. In November and December 2013 Pastor Zhang and over 20 others were [detained](#) without formal documentation after a group of church members attempted to petition a higher authority about a land dispute involving the church.

Lawyers representing the detainees were [harassed](#) and intimidated by 'hired thugs', and were repeatedly denied access to their clients. Lawyer Chang Boyang, who defended Pastor Zhang's sister Zhang Cujian, was summoned by the police for "gathering a crowd to disturb public order" on 27 May. In July, his family was informed that the charge had been changed to "suspicion of illegal commercial activities". It is believed that Chang has been detained in connection with his defence of disadvantaged groups including Christians, migrant workers, and Tibetans. He has had no access to his lawyers and remains in detention.

CSW's Chief Executive, Mervyn Thomas, said: "We are very disappointed to hear that Pastor Zhang has lost his appeal. Zhang's lawyers have repeatedly pointed out significant

concerns about the handling of the case by the court and the authorities. The fact that their concerns were ignored, and that the appeal trial took place without their knowledge, suggest a complete lack of respect for the work of lawyers who defend religious minorities and other "sensitive" cases. The treatment of recently released lawyer Gao Zhisheng and the detention of Chang Boyang are indicative of this endemic problem. We urge the Chinese authorities to uphold the rule of law in China, to release lawyer Chang and other lawyers detained on spurious charges, and to investigate thoroughly and impartially the handling of the case of Pastor Zhang Shaojie, with a view to securing his release."

Tibetan Monk freed from prison after serving full term

Radio Free Asia (20.08.2014) <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/freed-08202014130828.html> - A Tibetan monk linked to a self-immolation protest in China's Qinghai province was freed from prison this week after serving his term and was warmly received by supporters on his return home despite authorities' insistence that no celebrations be held, sources said.

Damchoe Tsultrim, aged 42, was among 10 Tibetans arrested in February 2012 following the self-immolation protest of Damchoe Sangpo, a monk at the Bongtak monastery in Themchen (in Chinese, Tianjun) county in the Tsonub (Haixi) Mongol and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, a local source told RFA's Tibetan Service on Wednesday.

Tsultrim was released on Tuesday after serving his full term of two and a half years in prison, and was quickly taken by authorities from a detention center in the provincial capital Xining to his native village, Kharmang, the source said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"[Chinese] authorities warned that no welcoming receptions of any kind were to be held for him," the source said. "But monks, relatives, and other people gathered in large numbers after he returned home and celebrated his return by offering ceremonial scarves and other gifts."

"At this time, he appears to be in good health, but it is unclear if he will be allowed to rejoin his monastery," the source said.

Suspected of involvement

Tsultrim was among a group of 20 Tibetans detained, with 10 later formally arrested and charged, on suspicion of involvement in the self-immolation death of Bongtak monastery monk Damchoe Sangpo on Feb. 17, 2012, RFA's source said.

The 10 who were charged, including Tsultrim and eight other monks and one layperson, were later sentenced to prison terms ranging from one to 10 years, the source said.

One monk, Geshe Khedrup Gyatso, was handed a 10-year term, while another, Sangye Gyatso, received a nine-year term, the source said, adding, "Kalsang Jamsem, who was sentenced to eight years, is being held at a prison in Xining, where he is forced to work at the prison's brick factory."

Damchoe Sangpo's protest was the 22nd of the now 131 self-immolations committed to date by Tibetans protesting Chinese policies and rule in Tibetan areas of China.

He had objected to the cancelling by Chinese authorities of a traditional prayer festival held by the monastery and to the presence at the monastery of Chinese security forces, sources said at the time.

China arrests 'nearly 1000' members of Quannengshen religious cult

Reuters (19.08.2014) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/19/quannengshen-china-arrests_n_5690704.html - Chinese authorities have arrested "nearly a thousand" members of a banned religious group, state media said on Tuesday, the latest in a series of official moves against a group that China has outlawed as an illegal cult.

China has sentenced dozens of followers of Quannengshen, or the Church of Almighty God, since the murder of a woman at a fastfood restaurant by suspected members of the group in June sparked a national outcry.

Among those arrested were 100 "high-level organizers and backbone members", state news agency Xinhua said, citing a statement from the Ministry of Public Security.

The murder trial is set to open on Thursday, Xinhua said.

The Quannengshen group, which originated in central Henan province, believes that Jesus was resurrected as Yang Xiangbin, wife of the sect's founder, Zhao Weishan, Xinhua said. Zhao is also known as Xu Wenshan, Xinhua said, adding that the couple fled to the United States in September 2000.

In 2012, China launched a crackdown on the group after it called for a "decisive battle" to slay the "Red Dragon" Communist Party, and preached that the world would end that year.

The party brooks no challenge to its rule and is obsessed with social stability. It has cracked down on cults, which have multiplied across the country in recent years. Demonstrations have been put down with force and some sect leaders executed.

Former President Jiang Zemin launched a campaign in 1999 to crush the Falun Gong religious group, banning it as an "evil cult" after thousands of practitioners staged a surprise but peaceful sit-in outside the leadership compound in Beijing to demand official recognition of their movement. (Reporting by Sui-Lee Wee; Editing by Nick Macfie)

Authorities shut down 2 Church-run kindergartens and approve arrests of 4 Christians

China Aid Association (18.08.2014) <http://www.chinaaid.org/2014/08/authorities-shut-down-2-church-run.html> - Authorities in China's southern Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region approved the arrest applications of four Christians on charges relating to the closure of two kindergartens, one in Guangxi and one in neighboring Hainan, that were run by the Christians' Guangdong-based church.

Cheng Jie was sent by the Guangzhou, Guangdong-based Liangren House Church to Liuzhou, Guangxi, to direct the church-run Hualin Foreign Language Experimental Kindergarten. Cheng was placed under criminal detention for "engaging in illegal business operations" on Feb. 18, 2014, along with Mo Xiliu, a teacher at the school. Mo has since been released; however, Cheng's official arrest was approved by the Liuzhou Procuratorate (see <http://www.chinaaid.org/2014/02/two-women-taken-into-custody-from.html> and <http://www.chinaaid.org/2014/02/update-lawyers-find-charges-against.html>).

On June 23, Li Jiatao, Huang Quirui and Fang Bin, a printing shop clerk, all members of Liangren House Church, were taken into custody by Guangzhou Domestic Security Protection Squad agents for "engaging in illegal business operations" and were taken to Liuzhou for holding. The three were detained in connection to Cheng's detention, which arose from authorities' accusation that an in-house published book was being illegally sold and was being used in the kindergarten to promote Christianity among minors (see <http://www.chinaaid.org/2014/06/house-church-members-taken-into-custody.html> and <http://www.chinaaid.org/2014/07/guangzhou-house-church-releases-letter.html>).

Arrest applications for Li, Huang and Fang were approved on July 30; however, according to former Liangren House Church pastor Wang Dao, their families haven't received demolition notices. "They are under many threats. For example, they are not allowed to give an interview to reporters," Wang said. "Ma Jiawen, Li Jiatao's husband has fled to Hong Kong. He said he dared not stay in Guangzhou as he was stalked."

On July 26, the authorities in Wanning, Hainan, shut down the church-run Wisdom Heart Kindergarten for "failing to pass annual inspection." The school was home to more than 100 "left behind" children, a name that refers to the children of migrant workers, who often travel to far away provinces in search of jobs, according to Wang. "We charge a very low fee, and we do it for the public good," Wang said.

Wang said that out of about 100 kindergartens in the area, Liangren House Church's kindergarten was the only one to "fail" inspection. "Many kindergartens that have poorer conditions than we do and whose places and investments are not as big as ours have all passed the test."

Shortly thereafter, on Aug. 8, the Yufeng District branch of the Liuzhou Bureau of Education issued an administrative penalty notice to the Hualin Kindergarten, claiming that the kindergarten conducted its education of students based off religious publications and reading materials, therefore violating the "Law of Education" by "forcing citizens to believe in a religion." As a result, the notice stated, those involved were disqualified from running the kindergarten.

Both the church and its lawyers have disputed authorities' claims that the book created and published by the church constitutes religious material. "There's absolutely no mention in our textbooks of God or Jesus," said Wang Dao, a former Liangren House Church pastor, who currently lives in the U.S.

"As for such a character education, you can say it's a doctrine of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or even Confucianism. Honesty and trustworthiness are the universal values of mankind," Wang said. "All parents hope their children will become honest. However, the director of the [Liuzhou] Bureau of Education personally came to threaten [the kindergarten's directors]. If we teach, they will ban the kindergarten. This is absurd and hard to understand."

Wang said the textbooks mingle games and literacy together to create a curriculum that has been popular with parents since its implementation more than 10 years ago.

However, out of helplessness, Wang said, the church has begun the process of closing Hualin Kindergarten, including determining where to "place the teachers" and refunding some tuition expenses.

Liangren House Church also wrote a letter to the parents of the Hualin Kindergarten students. In the letter, the church expressed their thanks for the parents' concern over the recent events. The church also wrote that since its founding in 2009, the kindergarten actively worked with the Liuzhou Municipal Bureau of Education, the community and the relevant departments in charge of public health and fire fighting and implemented all necessary stipulations set by those organizations. During the school's operation, it received titles such as "Non-Governmental Kindergarten in Yufeng District that Meets Standards," "Green Kindergarten of Liuzhou," and "Green Kindergarten of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region."

Wang said that while the parents support the church, they are afraid to say anything.

"The public security bureau, the procuratorate and the court held a meeting to discuss this religious case of [the church's]," Wang said. "The label they gave us is 'utilizing a religion to endanger state security.'"

Liangren House Church has hired a lawyer and plans to submit an administrative reconsideration suit and sue the bureau of education.

China frees prominent lawyer who defended religious freedom

Yahoo! News (07.08.2014) - China freed a prominent human rights lawyer after three years in prison on Thursday, his brother told Reuters, ending the latest period of detention for the religious-freedom campaigner whose treatment attracted international condemnation.

Gao Zhisheng, a Beijing-based lawyer, was held for almost three years from December 2011 at a remote prison in the far-western region of Xinjiang. He was accused of inciting subversion of state power, according to the official Xinhua news agency.

"He's out, he's free, he's at his father-in-law's house," his brother, Gao Zhiyi, said by telephone. "That's all I can tell you."

Gao Zhisheng, 50, had been imprisoned on and off since 2006, including some periods in extrajudicial facilities without charge. He has said in interviews that he was at times tortured.

China has not commented on the specifics of Gao's case saying it was a domestic matter but authorities have said that torture to extract confessions is illegal.

Gao attained international publicity for his campaigning for religious freedom, particularly for members of the banned religious group, Falun Gong.

Gao's wife, Geng He, 47, told a news conference outside the Chinese consulate in San Francisco, where she lives, that she spoke to her husband by phone and his voice sounded weak.

"My heart is still heavy because he's still being persecuted and he's not in very good health," she said through an interpreter, adding that she would like her husband to join her and their children, ages 21 and 10, in the United States.

Gao was cut off from his family during his time in prison, said Maya Wang of Human Rights Watch.

"His family only saw him twice in the last three years," Wang said. "Every time, they were only allowed to talk about conditions at home, and not allowed to ask about his health."

She said there was concern that like other activists, he could find himself released from prison only to be put under house arrest.

As a lawyer, Gao had also defended underground Christians and villagers embroiled in property disputes with government officials.

President Xi Jinping's administration has cracked down on dissent, detaining and jailing activists, muzzling Internet critics and strengthening restrictions on journalists in what some rights groups call the worst suppression of free expression in recent years.

Many lawyers and journalists were detained in the run-up to the anniversary of the bloody suppression of pro-democracy protests at Tiananmen Square in 1989.

(Additional reporting by Mary Papenfuss in San Francisco and Alex Dobuzinskis in Los Angeles, Editing by Robert Birsell and Sandra Maler)

China police investigate U.S. citizen near border with North Korea - source

Reuters (07.08.2014) - A Korean-American who runs a Christian NGO in a Chinese city on the border with North Korea is being investigated by Chinese authorities and has had his bank accounts frozen, a source with direct knowledge of the case told Reuters on Thursday.

Peter Hahn, a naturalized U.S. citizen, has been under interrogation by Chinese authorities for the last three weeks and is not permitted to leave the country, said the source, who requested anonymity, citing the sensitive nature of the case.

The source did not know what prompted the probe, which coincides with an investigation of a Canadian Christian couple who run a coffee shop in the nearby city of Dandong on suspicion they stole military secrets.

Several people working in the region, or who are in contact with those that do, said Hahn's case appeared to be part of a wider sweep of Christian-run NGOs and businesses along the Chinese side of the border with North Korea.

While China can be suspicious of Christian groups and President Xi Jinping has launched a wide crackdown on underground churches, foreign missionaries usually operate without too much harassment.

Hahn runs a school for ethnic Korean children in the Chinese city of Tumen. Through his Tumen River Area Development Initiative (TRADI) NGO, he also operates several humanitarian projects and joint venture companies inside North Korea, including a local bus service in the Rajin-Songbon (Rason) Special Economic Zone.

The school declined to comment when asked about the case, and Tumen police could not be reached for comment.

A spokesman at the U.S. embassy in Beijing said he could not provide any information on the matter. Marie Harf, a spokeswoman for the U.S. State Department in Washington, said she was aware of the reports about Hahn's detention but could not comment further for reasons of privacy.

Hahn's company cars had been confiscated and his bank accounts frozen, the source said, adding that his NGO's humanitarian food shipments to North Korea had been suspended following the freeze.

Openly Christian

The source said that Hahn was a Christian and was open about his faith. A description on its website said Hahn founded the NGO in 1997 to help North Korean refugees in Yanji, the capital of China's autonomous ethnic Korean region, a short drive from Tumen, where Hahn is based.

"TRADI's main goal is to sacrifice themselves for the ministry of God," a description of the NGO's vision on its website says. "Through the bridge that TRADI built around the community of Tumen and North Korea, we hope to break down the wall of oppression, imprisonment, and injustice."

North Korea espouses freedom of religion, but it is ranked as one of the world's most oppressive regimes in terms of such freedom, and severely punishes citizens who veer from a state-sponsored ideology that venerates its leaders.

It was not immediately clear why China, North Korea's main ally and economic benefactor, was cracking down on missionaries in the region, but experts said it had cooperated with North Korea in the past along the border.

"North Korean security forces and diplomatic officials are working particularly hard this calendar year to combat growth in religious activities along the border," said Christopher Green of the Seoul-based Daily NK website, quoting repeated reports from sources both inside North Korea and in cities on the Chinese side of the border.

Reuters was unable to independently verify the reports from inside isolated North Korea.

Christian activists focused on China said the two countries had been collaborating closely, despite an apparent dip in relations between Beijing and Pyongyang.

"In recent years they have not always seen eye to eye, but it's a common interest for both sides to crack down on the border, particularly refugee issues," said Bob Fu of China Aid, a U.S.-based Christian advocacy group.

China's porous border with North Korea, which snakes through mountains, is a thriving hub of cross-border black market trade as well as a route taken by North Korean refugees fleeing economic hardship and religious and political persecution.

Jerusalem of the east

"Pyongyang was once known as the Jerusalem of the East," said David Alton, chairman of the UK parliament's All-Party Parliamentary Group on North Korea, referring to how the city was a thriving center for missionaries long before Korea was divided.

"North Korea's leadership is well aware that below the surface, secret religious faith remains deep in the hearts of many North Koreans," he told Reuters.

"Their fear of Christianity has led to suppression, persecution (and) cruel incarceration."

Many missionaries are drawn to the Rason SEZ, where foreigners, including U.S. citizens, can gain a residence permit and set up joint venture companies with the local government.

While some foreign Christians in sensitive border areas are relatively open about their faith, others are wary of being monitored by North Korea and China and use phrases like "meeting place" to describe underground or house churches.

Buses operated by Hahn's NGO with a North Korean partner in Rason bear a logo resembling a fish, a secret symbol used by early Christians' persecution in the Roman Empire.

U.S. missionary Kenneth Bae, sentenced by Pyongyang last year to 15 years hard labour for attempting to overthrow the state, operated businesses in Dandong and used his tour company, Nation Tours, to take foreign missionaries across the border into North Korea.

South Korean funds

Beyond tours, bakeries that produce small, nutritious buns that are distributed to school children and orphans in North Korean border cities are often set up by missionary groups in China, or in North Korea in cooperation with the North Korean authorities.

The bakeries distribute much-needed food to impoverished North Korea, but critics argue such humanitarian aid is often deeply intertwined with religious conversation and salvation.

Hahn, who is based in California but has a residence permit for Rason, also runs a bakery, attached to the school, which has produced bread for North Korea since 2003.

Deliveries of bread from the bakery to North Korean children had been delayed by the freeze of Hahn's funds, the source said.

A proportion of Hahn's funding came from churches in South Korea. His school received money from Pohang Baptist Church in South Korea, according to a letter from the school's vice principal on the church's website.

The investigation into Canadians Kevin Garratt and his wife Julia Dawn Garratt came a week after Canada took the unusual step of singling out Chinese hackers for attacking a key computer network and lodged a protest with Beijing.

In response, China accused Canada of making irresponsible accusations that lacked credible evidence.

"With the Garratts, that was tit-for-tat with what happened in Canada. Peter Hahn is a different issue, I think it's more related to his faith and the work he was doing," said David Etter, who was recently forced to close his Christian-run Western restaurant in Yanji, citing a lack of customers.

"He was very open about his faith and why he was doing what he was doing," he said.

Xinjiang city bans Islamic dress on public transport

BBC News (06.08.2014) - Officials in Karamay said the ban, which prohibits headscarves, partial face veils and burkas, would last until 20 August due to a local sports event.

Xinjiang, home to the Muslim Uighur minority, has seen an upsurge in violence in recent months.

Authorities have blamed Uighur separatists for the violence.

In a report by the Karamay Daily which was carried by national media outlets, officials listed the "five types of people" who would be banned from public transport.

They are people wearing headscarves, veils, burkas, clothes with the crescent moon and star symbol, and "youths with long beards".

"Passengers who do not co-operate, particularly the 'five types of people', will be reported to the police," said the report, which added that all commuters would be subject to bag checks.

"The security measures will ensure social stability and protect the lives, property and safety of citizens of all races," said the report.

Karamay is a city about 400km north of the region's capital Urumqi, which was hit by deadly attacks in April and May at a railway station and a market.

The latest unrest in Xinjiang took place on 28 July in Yarkant county, also known as Shache.

Chinese state-run news agency Xinhua said a group armed with knives and axes stormed a police station and government offices. It said 37 civilians and 59 attackers were killed

But an Uighur rights group has disputed that account, saying that police had opened fire on people protesting against a Ramadan crackdown on Muslims.

Reports surfaced last month that some government departments in Xinjiang were banning Muslim staff from fasting during Ramadan.

Days after the Yarkant incident the imam of China's largest mosque, in the Xinjiang city of Kashgar, was stabbed and killed.

The imam, Jume Tahir, was said to be deeply unpopular among Uighurs who disliked the fact that he praised Communist Party policies while preaching in his mosque.

Chinese Internet users had mixed reactions to the Karamay city ruling on Weibo, China's microblogging service.

"So every bearded or burka-clad person is a terrorist? For goodness sake these are traditional customs," said one.

Others however argued it was a necessary measure. "Having a beard definitely does not mean you are a terrorist. But for the sake of public safety, we should take whatever precautions we can take," said a user.

Buddhist leader and followers detained, homes searched

CSW (05.08.2014) - Chinese Buddhist leader Wu Zeheng (also known as Shi Xingwu) and approximately 18 of his followers remain in detention after police searched residences at Yinshi Yayuan complex in Zhuhai City, Guangdong Province, on 29 July, according to reports from Wu's followers.

Around one hundred police officers, some armed, entered the complex at 11pm and searched the homes of Wu and several of his followers. A Facebook [page](#) about the incident lists several testimonies from residents, including children. One witness claims that Wu's 71-year-old mother was injured while she tried to protect him. Others report that children as young as nine were taken to the police station that night and released several hours later. In total, over 40 people were arrested. Companies owned by Wu's followers in Shenzhen and Shanghai were also searched and one was forced to close. Followers continued to be harassed from 30-31 July.

In almost all cases, witnesses report being confused as to why their residences were being searched. One 17-year-old witness said that the police had told his family they were suspected of drug use, which he denies. Police have informed Wu's followers that most of those still in detention will be detained for 30 days. No justification was given for this period of detention and the reports do not mention any legal charges against the detainees. Although no clear reason has been given for either the searches or the detention of Wu and his followers, some note that Wu's group had recently expanded their charity work and was growing in number.

Wu Zeheng is a prominent Buddhist leader sentenced to 11 years in prison in 1999 for "economic crimes" after he wrote a letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and State Council denouncing human rights violations and calling for reform. Since his release from prison on 28 February 2010, Wu Zeheng has been subjected to close surveillance by the Chinese authorities. In 2011, on the eve of an important Buddhist holiday, Wu was beaten, threatened and detained on "suspicion of intending to organize an illegal assembly", and in 2013 he was ordered to pay a fine of 2.5 million yuan in relation to his conviction for "economic crimes", three years after he completed his ten-year prison sentence.

CSW's Chief Executive, Mervyn Thomas, said: "CSW is deeply concerned about reports that police have detained Buddhist leader Wu Zeheng and his followers. We are particularly alarmed at witnesses' account of the rough and threatening manner in which police conducted searches. We note that Christians in Zhejiang have also recently reported acts of violence by police against those attempting to prevent crosses being removed from their churches. CSW calls on the Chinese government to hold the police officers responsible for these actions to account, and to guarantee the right to freedom of religion and belief for people of all faiths in China".

Uighur scholar charged with separatism amid new violence in western China

The Washington Post (30.07.2014) - A prominent Uighur scholar was formally charged with separatism Wednesday and will face trial in Xinjiang, even as conflicting accounts of violence in the restive Chinese region have emerged from Uighurs and the government.

The charges against Ilham Tohti were announced on the microblogging account of the procuratorate's office in Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi. And it comes in the face of criticism and protest by international human rights groups and lobbying by Western diplomats.

Tohti, an economics professor at a Beijing university, is known for speaking out for the rights of the Uighur ethnic minority in Xinjiang. He was taken from his Beijing home in January by authorities, who accused him of secession.

In Washington, State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf expressed concern about the indictment of Tohti and called on China to release him and his students "and to guarantee them the protections and freedoms to which they are entitled under China's international human rights commitments, including freedom of expression."

The formal charge of separatism is worrisome because it can result in a death sentence, said Sophie Richardson of New York-based Human Rights Watch.

The announcement came two days after reports of a clash between Uighurs and authorities in the Xinjiang region that killed or wounded dozens.

The exact death toll and circumstances of the violence have been difficult to independently determine.

Uighur groups say authorities have cut off Internet service and other communications in the area near the city of Kashgar. The only official report has come from the state-run Xinhua News Agency.

Xinhua's account, which has been questioned by overseas Uighur groups, said police opened fire on dozens of people armed with knives and axes who attacked a police station and government offices in the Elixku Township.

The Washington-based Uyghur American Association cited accounts from unnamed local Uighurs contradicting the government's version of events. In a statement, the organization said that the Uighurs involved were protesting a crackdown by authorities during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The association said more than 20 Uighurs were killed and more than 70 arrested.

The heightened tensions are a result of a spate of attacks in recent months across China that authorities attribute to Muslim extremists.

For years, many Uighurs and other smaller Muslim minorities in Xinjiang have agitated against China's authoritarian government. Their protests are a reaction, Uighur groups say, to oppressive official policies, religious restrictions and widespread discrimination.

The government has long denied any oppression of Uighurs or any other ethnic minority and has presented its strict security efforts as part of an increasingly intense counterterrorism response to violent extremists espousing separatism.

Dalai Lama photo on open display at Tibetan Horse-Race festival

Radio Free Asia (29.07.2014) <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/display-07292014161126.html> - In open defiance of authorities, Tibetans set up a portrait of exiled spiritual leader the Dalai Lama at a traditional horse-racing festival in China's Sichuan province this week, inviting festival-goers to pray before the photo and make offerings, sources said.

The popular festival, held this year on July 27 in Dziwa village in Bathang (in Chinese, Batang) county in the Kardze (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, opened with the Dalai Lama portrait's formal installation, a Tibetan living in exile told RFA's Tibetan Service on Tuesday.

"Though Chinese authorities imposed restrictions on the festival, the Tibetans brought in a portrait of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and placed it on a throne," Tsultrim Choedar said, citing local sources.

"The organizers also invited Tibetans gathered at the festival to view the photo and offer ceremonial scarves," he said.

"They prayed for the long life of the Dalai Lama and other prominent religious teachers, and also prayed for a resolution of the question of Tibet."

The Dalai Lama, who fled Tibet into exile in India in 1959, is reviled by Chinese leaders as a dangerous separatist who seeks to split the formerly self-governing region from Beijing's rule.

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

A popular tradition

Horse racing festivals date back to the time of the Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo in the seventh century, and are still popular in Tibetan rural nomadic areas—especially in the historical southeastern Tibetan region of Kham, which has largely been absorbed into Chinese provinces, Choedar said.

"This time, when the horse race was organized in Dziwa village, the festival began with an invitation to all who came to the festival to participate in the installation of Dalai Lama's portrait and to receive blessings," he said.

Most of the horse-racing events are held annually "but in some places the event is organized twice each year."

Many travel for days to attend the festivals, he said.

In September 2012, Bathang-area Tibetans also defied authorities by parading large

portraits of the Dalai Lama during the enthronement of a local religious leader, Tibetan sources told RFA in earlier reports.

Several thousand Tibetans, many on motorbikes, took part in the enthronement ceremony to welcome the young lama, one source said, adding, "Many displayed huge photos of the Dalai Lama on their motorbikes and paraded in the ceremony."

And in March this year, a 31-year-old nun named Drolma self-immolated near a monastery in Bathang to protest Beijing's rule, sources in the region and in exile said.

Sporadic demonstrations challenging Chinese rule have continued in Tibetan-populated areas of China since widespread protests swept the region in 2008, with 131 Tibetans to date setting themselves ablaze to oppose Beijing's rule and call for the Dalai Lama's return.

China's grim religious freedom problem

The Washington Post (29.07.2014) - While last month marked the 25th anniversary of China's silencing freedom in Tiananmen Square, this month China has been cementing this grim legacy — particularly regarding religious freedom.

From repressing Muslims to bulldozing churches and tearing down crosses, Chinese officials have been denying the internationally guaranteed right to believe or not believe. The simple proposition that individuals have the right to live out their beliefs openly and peacefully, without fear or intimidation, clearly frightens Chinese authorities, as evidenced by their repressive persecution of numerous faith communities.

During the just-concluded month of Ramadan, China denied Uighur Muslim students, teachers, professors and government employees the freedom to fast and fulfill related duties. With Ramadan coinciding this year with the commemoration of the Communist Party's founding, Chinese authorities used the occasion to identify fasting Muslims, particularly in Xinjiang province. Those defying the ban have been subject to threats, detention and arrests.

In recent years, officials have shut down religious sites; conducted raids on independent schools, leading to multiple injuries and even deaths; confiscated religious literature; restricted private study of the Quran; monitored the sermons of imams and forced them to undergo political training; restricted Muslim dress and religious expression; banned children from being brought to mosques; and arbitrarily deemed religious gatherings and activities "illegal."

In neighbouring Tibet, religious freedom conditions for Buddhists are deteriorating. Since May 2011, more than 130 Buddhists, including at least 61 monks, nuns and former nuns, have immolated themselves. Their desperate protests are tied directly to Beijing's brutal repression of Tibetan religious practice and culture.

Beijing also continues its relentless 15-year campaign to obliterate the Falun Gong, maintaining an extrajudicial security apparatus, the 6-10 Office, to further that aim. There have been reports of deaths in custody, the use of psychiatric experiments and the harvesting of organs.

And China continues to persecute Christians.

Catholic and Protestant groups refusing to register with the government face arrests, fines and the shuttering of their churches. China's government has issued a chilling directive to "eradicate" unregistered Protestant churches over the next decade. In January and March, officials seized 20 members, including the pastor, of the Holy Love Fellowship, an unregistered home church in Beijing, detaining them in space set aside for violent criminals.

Since January, China's Christians have confronted an ominous new threat to worship and practice — governmental targeting of registered churches and their leaders. In Zhejiang province, where Christianity has grown dramatically, the government has targeted more than 100 churches, demolishing dozens, forcing others to make major alterations and removing steeples and crosses. In April, authorities bulldozed the Sanjiang Church, which housed a congregation numbering in the thousands.

There are signs that this latest persecution of Christians may not be limited to Zhejiang province. On July 4, Pastor Zhang Shaojie of the Nanle County Christian Church, a fast-growing registered church in Henan province, was convicted on trumped-up criminal charges and sentenced to 12 years in prison. Church members have been harassed and prevented from holding services.

The 12-year prison sentence of a pastor marks a chilling turn for the worse in an already bleak scene. China's appalling religious freedom record underscores the obvious: Little has changed since Beijing shamed itself before the world 25 years ago, massacring its own people for the "crime" of demanding their rights.

China's leaders undoubtedly believe — as did their predecessors — that repression and fear will solidify their control and bring security. They are mistaken. By denying the bedrock freedoms of conscience and religion, China risks more restiveness and instability.

If China is to assume a truly honored place among the community of nations, its leaders must reject the dark ways of repression and embrace the light of liberty for all.

China removes Crosses from two more churches in crackdown

The New York Times (28.07.2014) - In another sign of the authorities' efforts to contain one of China's fastest-growing religions, a government demolition campaign against public symbols of the Christian faith has toppled crosses at two more churches in the coastal province of Zhejiang, according to residents there.

On Monday, public security officials in the city of Wenzhou used a crane and blowtorch to cut loose the red, 10-foot crucifix that had adorned the Longgang Township Gratitude Church, witnesses said. Unlike in previous confrontations between the police and parishioners that have unfolded in recent months, the congregants did not offer resistance.

"We didn't want to get in a fight with them, but obviously what they did was illegal," said the Rev. Qu Linuo, a pastor from a nearby church, who was among the crowd of believers who held an overnight vigil before the police arrived.

On Friday, congregants at the Wenling Church in the city of Taizhou faced off with as many as 4,000 police officers but failed to prevent the removal of two crosses from atop their building. One congregant said as many as 40 people were detained during the standoff.

Since early spring, the authorities in Zhejiang Province have issued demolition notices to more than 100 churches, saying their structures violated zoning regulations. Most of the targeted churches are state-approved, in contrast to so-called underground congregations that are frequently singled out by the authorities.

Officials have been largely taking aim at church steeples and their crosses, but in April the authorities tore down the Sanjiang Church, a highly visible landmark in Wenzhou, saying the entire structure violated building codes. The church, which stood along a highway, had been cited by the local government as a model project.

Church leaders and analysts say the battle in Zhejiang, one of China's wealthiest provinces, highlights the Chinese leadership's discomfort with the growing allure of Christianity, whose adherents are said to rival in number the 86 million members of the Communist Party.

The crackdown on Christianity in Zhejiang also coincides with a nationwide campaign that has been directed at legal rights defenders, pro-democracy advocates and liberal online commentators.

Although the government has cited zoning rules in its fight against the churches, a provincial policy paper suggests that there may be other reasons, advising officials to use the zoning language in an effort to avoid international scrutiny.

"This is crucial to investigate and prosecute from the perspective of laws and regulations to avoid inviting heavy criticism," according to the paper, called a Working Document Concerning the Realization of Handling of Illegal Religious Buildings, which began circulating last summer.

Local officials could not be reached for comment on Monday.

Elsewhere in Zhejiang, one of China's oldest Catholic churches, built in the 19th century by French missionaries in the coastal city of Ningbo, was gutted early Monday by a fire that reportedly began at the altar, according to the state news media. There were no immediate indications that the fire had been deliberately set, but it was still likely to heighten the belief among Christians that they are under siege.

Across Zhejiang, scores of congregations have organized round-the-clock lookout teams to watch for arriving demolition crews. At Salvation Church in Wenzhou, more than 100 parishioners have been standing sentinel since July 21, when a pitched battle between the police and congregants left more than 50 parishioners injured, some seriously. Although the director of the church, facing intense government pressure, said he would allow the cross to be removed, congregants have vowed to resist.

At the Wenling Church in Taizhou, congregants said hundreds of Christians sang hymns at daybreak on Friday as the riot police surrounded the church, which is anchored by a distinctive clock tower capped by a bright red cross. In a phone interview, one congregant, Lemon Huang, said the show of force was overwhelming and unnecessary. "Some wore police uniforms, with helmets and shields, some were plainclothes police and some wore red armbands — just like the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution," Ms. Huang said.

After a daylong effort that required a towering crane and an electric buzz saw, workers removed the church's two crosses and carted them away.

A similar scene unfolded on Monday at the Longgang Township Gratitude Church. Mr. Qu, the pastor from the nearby church, said about 200 people, some in their 70s and 80s, who were holding a vigil in front of the church ultimately stepped aside to allow the police to move when they arrived with a bulldozer.

After more than two hours, the cross was lowered by crane and handed over to the parishioners, who carried it back into the church. "Many of them were weeping inconsolably," Mr. Qu said.

Chinese police clash with Christian protesters over cross removal

Reuters (23.07.2014) - Police in eastern China clashed in the middle of the night with Christian protesters massed around their church on Monday, but failed to carry out a government order to remove a cross from the building, according to witnesses and online accounts.

Several people were injured in the two-hour melee.

Dozens of churches in the wealthy province of Zhejiang have received government notices in the past few weeks demanding the demolition of church buildings or removal of crosses in what the government says is a campaign aimed at illegal structures, the U.S.-based Christian group ChinaAid says.

Rights groups and Christians say it amounts to religious persecution, which ignores the protection of religious freedom in China's constitution.

In the latest move, police tried to remove a cross from a church in Pingyang county close to Wenzhou city. But the congregation surrounded the church and prevented police from getting close, two witnesses said.

"We did not want them to get close, so we joined up to stop them getting in, but they came at us and beat us," one of the protesters, who gave his family name as Zhang, told Reuters by telephone, putting the number of police at about 500.

Zhang said police had been unable to remove the cross, but had locked down the site.

Another witness, who asked not to be identified, said the clashes had started at 2 a.m. and went on for two hours. She knew of at least five people who needed hospital treatment.

"We are Christians and are not looking for trouble, and if the government comes to us with reasonable requests, we will not oppose it. But using force on us at 2 a.m. is unacceptable and we cannot understand why they are doing it," she added.

Pictures on the Twitter-like microblogging site Weibo and mobile messaging app WeChat showed protesters fighting with police. Several people had bloodied faces.

Reuters was unable to independently verify the veracity of the pictures and many were swiftly removed by government censors.

An official who answered the telephone at the Pingyang government said he did "not understand the situation" and declined further comment. Reuters was unable to reach Pingyang police.

Zhejiang sits on the coast to the south of Shanghai and has long been known as a hub of private enterprise.

China has about 65 million Christians, split between those who worship at state-sanctioned churches and those who belong to underground churches. Rights groups frequently accuse China of not respecting freedom of religion, charges Beijing denies.

About 90,000 "mass incidents" – a euphemism for protests – occur each year in China, triggered by corruption, pollution, illegal land grabs and other grievances.

Chinese Christians injured in 'bloody' police clash

Christian Today (22.07.2014) - The Chinese government's crackdown on churches is showing no sign of slowing down, as at least four Christians were severely injured during a clash with officials yesterday morning.

At 3am local time on 21 July, International Christian Concern (ICC) reports that 400 police officers attempted to remove a cross from the roof of Sjuritou Salvation Church in Wenzhou, Zhejiang province, about 500 kilometres south of Shanghai.

Members of the church have been guarding the building for the past month following several threats of demolition from government authorities. Pastor Zhan Yingsheng last week resigned from his position and said he will now dedicate his life to fasting, praying and preparing to be martyred for his faith.

In a letter written on July 17, Pastor Zhan shares his concern at the government's increased persecution of Christians, and insists he is not "making a show or trying to get some publicity" but "as a Christian facing unrighteousness, my conscience urges me to do my duty. I wish to better understand the meaning of 'Christ calling on me to die for Him'."

Known as the 'Jerusalem of the East', Wenzhou is reportedly home to the largest Christian community in China and around 1,000 people gathered to form a human blockade against police at Salvation Church on the night of the attack. However, police are said to have used iron batons to beat those who stood in their way, and "bloody pictures and videos of riots" that ensued are now circulating on social networks.

The church is just one of hundreds to be targeted in Zhejiang province – at least 360 have already been completely or partially demolished, apparently as a result of defying building regulations.

Local Christians, however, are convinced that it is part of an invigorated attack against Christianity, which is seen as a rival to the Communist government. ICC reports that local officials "compete" to remove the most church crosses in order to bolster their own careers.

Despite the latest incident of violence, members of Salvation Church are determined to protect their building, and defend their faith.

"We will continue to guard our church cross to the end," one local told ICC.

Sooyoung Kim, ICC Regional Manager for Southeast Asia, has urged the Chinese government to promote the right to religious freedom, which is guaranteed under the nation's constitution.

"Zhejiang provincial authorities have carefully planned and carried out their systematic attack against Christianity and churches. We call on the government of China in the strongest possible terms to immediately stop the anti-church campaign that hurts its own people's heart," she says.

"The world needs a peaceful China that respects human dignity and freedom of religions."

Religious freedom protections are limited to those who worship within state-sanctioned religious bodies in China. Those who choose to practice their faith outside of these, or whose beliefs are not officially recognised by the Government, are at constant risk of being accused of participating in illegal activities, which carries heavy punishment.

However, even those who worship within state-approved 'Three-Self' churches are now facing difficulties, but despite heavy persecution, there are now thought to be 100 million Christians in China – a significant increase from the one million believers when the Communist party came to power in 1949.

Son pleads for release of father imprisoned for religion in China

Brampton Guardian (17.07.2014) - A Mississauga man is calling for the release his father, who is being held in a Chinese detention centre for following the banned Falun Gong religion.

Paul Li says his father, Li Xiaobo, has spent the past four months in Longquanyi detention centre in the south-central China awaiting trial for being a supporter of Falun Gong, a spiritual movement that Beijing has outlawed.

Li says his father, who is 58, has little chance of a fair hearing and will likely face a lengthy prison sentence if his case is allowed to go to trial.

The Chinese government has faced international criticism for its harsh suppression of Falun Gong since it declared it a "heretical" organization and began a crackdown on followers in 1999. Tens of thousands of Falun Gong practitioners are believed to have been imprisoned in China's detention centres and "re-education through labour" camps.

Li's father previously spent eight years in prison for his beliefs, being released in 2012, and now Li fears the same fate awaits him again.

"We have found a lawyer willing to represent him, but even so, there is no possibility of a fair hearing," he said. "If the trial goes forward, my father will be sentenced to prison again, and his life will be in danger."

Li, a Canadian citizen, was arrested with his father in the city of Chengdu in April when police caught them distributing leaflets about state repression of Falun Gong. He had moved to Chengdu from Mississauga to live closer to his father in 2009.

The pair were sent to a detention facility but Li, who is also a Falun Gong practitioner, was released four days later once it emerged he holds a Canadian passport. He was ordered to leave China immediately but Xiaobo, who is a Chinese national and not a Canadian like his son, remains imprisoned.

Li has now returned to Mississauga where he lives with his mother and is campaigning to have his father freed.

"I am urgently calling for the international community's support to help get my father released and reunited with me in Canada," he said.

Li is fearful for his father's safety as he alleges Xiaobo was tortured during his previous term in jail. According to Li, Falun Gong adherents like his father were regularly beaten by guards, forced to stand naked outside in winter and deprived of food and sleep. In some cases, he claims, they were forced to lick their own blood off the walls. The News has not seen any proof of these specific allegations, but they are similar to numerous reports of physical abuse against Falun Gong practitioners in Chinese detention centres.

Brad Butt, MP for Mississauga-Streetsville, has thrown his support behind Li's cause and at his request Foreign Affairs has spoken with Chinese diplomats. Although Ottawa's leverage in this case is limited as Xiaobo is not Canadian, Butt said the federal government frequently makes its views on China's treatment of religious minorities known and that such pressure could have an effect.

"Sometimes there can be some moral suasion on behalf of Canada to ask the Chinese government to look at this individual's circumstances and determine whether there is some additional role that they can take," he said.

That point was echoed by Joel Chipkar, vice-president of the Falun Dafa Association of Toronto, who said that public attention in Canada could have influence on the ground in China.

"We find that it does help for the prison guards, the police who are involved, they see that this case is important and they had better watch their step," he said.

China Xinjiang: Muslim students 'made to eat' at Ramadan

BBC (11.07.2014) - Several university students from China's western region of Xinjiang have told the BBC that they are being banned from fasting during the month of Ramadan.

The three Muslim students we spoke to the BBC did not want their identities revealed as they fear government reprisals for speaking about a sensitive issue.

But they told us they were being forced to have meals with professors to ensure they were not fasting.

Those who refuse to eat risk being punished by officials.

One student told us, "If you want a normal life here then you'd better not fast."

Xinjiang is home to the Uighur ethnic minority - most of whom are Muslim.

Beijing blames a string of recent attacks on Muslim extremists and what it calls overseas terrorist groups.

On Thursday, courts in Xinjiang handed 32 people prison terms for downloading or sending "violent terror" videos.

Many Uighurs, however, say the violence is being fuelled by Beijing's repression of their cultural and religious beliefs.

The students who spoke to the BBC said that fasting was banned in all universities across the region.

Several government departments are also enforcing a ban.

One government hospital even got Muslim staff to sign a written pledge promising not to fast.

Fasting during the month of Ramadan - when the faithful do not eat or drink from sunrise to sunset - is considered one of the five pillars of Islam.

Traditionally, children, pregnant women, the sick and those travelling are exempt from fasting.

As part of a propaganda drive, state-run newspapers in Xinjiang have been running editorials warning about the health dangers of not eating and drinking.

This is not the first time the Chinese authorities have restricted fasting in Xinjiang.

But with the restrictions coming amidst growing violence in the region, it is likely to exacerbate tensions.

The students we spoke to at Kashgar Normal University said those Uighurs refusing to eat received official warnings, which could seriously affect their future career prospects.

In some cases, students could even be denied by their degrees.

"Most of us would like to fast," said one of the students. "But with the current situation most of us have decided against it."

China's Christians fear new persecution after latest wave of church demolitions

By Brice Pedroletti

The Guardian (05.07.2014) - Chinese authorities have begun the demolition of a Christian church after a weeks-long standoff between worshippers and the local government, which claims it is an illegal structure.

China's Communist party keeps a tight grip on religion, fearing challenges to its authority, but allows worship at state-controlled churches.

Authorities had approved the construction of the Sanjiang church in Wenzhou city within an area of 1,881 sq metres but the finished building was roughly four times that size, state media reported.

Images posted online showed the church surrounded by several bright yellow excavators, some gouging holes in the side of the towering structure.

"Today the Wenzhou Sanjiang church is being demolished; where will our more than 1,000 believers gather after this? Why tear down our church?" Caoyuan Zhibing said in a microblog post that included a photo said to be from the scene, in the eastern province of Zhejiang.

Thousands of worshippers have previously flocked to the church to protect it, but online posts said police locked down the area on Monday, blocking traffic. "The church of God is being demolished, how do you feel? So sad," said a poster using the name Joyful Hope.

The government of Yongjia county, which administers the area, declined to comment. "We are unclear about these issues," said an official at the county's main office.

A US-based religious rights group, the China Aid Association (CAA), said last week that the local government had reneged on a deal under which the church would demolish just two storeys of an accessory building, not the main structure.

CAA said several churches in Wenzhou, a centre for private enterprise that is also home to a thriving Christian community, have been forced to remove prominent crosses from their rooftops and threatened with partial or total demolition.

The state-linked China Christian Council estimates the country has around 20 million Christians – not including Catholics – 70% of whom live in rural areas.

But the true number of worshippers could be higher, as so-called underground or house churches have also sprung up among Christians seeking to practise their faith outside government control.

Pastor Zhang Shaojie sentenced to 12 years in prison

CSW (04.07.2014) - Pastor Zhang Shaojie of Nanle County Christian Church, Henan Province, has been sentenced to 12 years in prison for fraud and "gathering a crowd to disturb public order", according to reports, which have been confirmed by China Aid Association. He has also been fined 100,000 RMB (approximately £9,400).

Over 20 members of Nanle County Christian Church, Henan, which belongs to the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement, were [detained](#) without formal documentation in November 2013. Church members, lawyers and Christians [visiting](#) the family of

detained Protestant Pastor Zhang Shaojie were beaten, harassed and detained by "hired thugs", police and government agencies in December 2013. Six church members arrested in November and December 2013 remain in detention.

The date for Pastor Zhang's trial was changed several times and the trial itself was suspended amid concerns about the authenticity of the witnesses' testimonies. Pastor Zhang was also left with no option but to dismiss his original lawyers when it appeared they were at risk of losing their licences.

Chinese-language commentators on social media are calling the sentence "very heavy". The sentence comes just months after a spate of [forced demolitions](#) and the removal of religious symbols from churches in Zhejiang Province prompted fears among some Chinese Christians of increasing restrictions on both state-sanctioned and unregistered congregations by the government.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "We are extremely concerned by the lengthy sentence given to Pastor Zhang Shaojie. This result comes after months of uncertainty, in a case riddled with irregularities and extra-legal measures against the detainees and their families, as well as severe restrictions on the entire church congregation. We believe there is strong reason to suggest that Pastor Zhang is being targeted because of his position as the leader of Nanle Church, and that the charges against him are false. We call on the Chinese authorities to immediately review the sentence given to Pastor Zhang with a view to securing his unconditional release."

China bans Xinjiang officials from observing Ramadan fast

BBC (02.07.2014) / <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-28123267> - Several government departments in China's far western region of Xinjiang have banned Muslim staff from fasting during the month of Ramadan.

One department website said that civil servants cannot "take part in fasting and other religious activities".

The move comes amid tightened security in the region which has been hit by a growing number of violent attacks.

Authorities blame separatist Muslim Uighurs, but Uighur leaders deny they are behind the attacks.

Activists have accused Beijing of exaggerating the threat from Uighur separatists to justify a crackdown on the Uighurs' religious and cultural freedoms.

Increasing tensions

State-administered Bozhou Radio and TV University said on its website that the fasting ban applied to party members, teachers and young people.

"We remind everyone that they are not permitted to observe a Ramadan fast," it said.

Similarly a weather bureau in western Xinjiang was reported by the AFP news agency to have said on its website that the ban was "in accordance with instructions from higher authorities".

The BBC's Martin Patience in Beijing says that this is not the first time that China has restricted fasting in Xinjiang.

But our correspondent says that with Beijing blaming extremist Uighurs for growing violence, the ban is likely to be seen by many Muslims as an attack on their religion, further increasing tensions.

Among those imposing a ban are a commercial affairs department and a government hospital which got Muslim staff to sign a written pledge that they would not fast.

State-run newspapers have in addition been running editorials warning about the health dangers of fasting.

Many Uighurs say that the suppression of their cultural and religious freedoms is fuelling the unrest in the region and attacks elsewhere in China.

Last month 13 assailants were killed in an attack on a police station in the restive province.

Uighurs and Xinjiang

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

China: Three Nanle Church members released, six still detained

CSW (19.06.2014) - Three members of Nanle County Christian Church detained since November 2013 were released on 11 June 2014, according to reports from China Aid Association.

Fan Ruiling (also known as Fan Ruizhen), Yan Beibei and Zhao Zhijun were among over 20 members of Nanle County Christian Church detained in November and December 2013. Yan Beibei, 23, was the youngest church member detained.

On 15 November, several church members, including Yan Beibei and Zhao Zhijun, were detained after petitioning a higher authority about a land dispute involving the church, which belongs to the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). The following day, police detained the church's pastor, Zhang Shaojie, without any [formal documentation](#). Fan Ruiling was detained after attending a church service on 17 November. Church members, lawyers and Christians visiting the family of detained Protestant Pastor Zhang Shaojie were beaten, harassed and detained by "hired thugs", police and government agencies in [December 2013](#).

The release of Fan, Yan and Zhao leaves six church members in detention, including Pastor Zhang Shaojie and his sister, Zhang Cuijian. Although some lawyers have been able to meet with their clients, so far only Zhang Shaojie has been to trial. He faces charges of "fraud" and "disturbing public order".

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "We welcome the release of Fan Ruiling, Yan Beibei and Zhao Zhijun from detention in Henan Province. At the same time, we remain concerned about the six church members still detained, in particular those detained at an unknown location. We are especially concerned that the majority of the detainees have not been allowed to meet with their lawyers. CSW therefore calls on the Chinese authorities to allow all the lawyers to meet with their clients. We further urge the relevant authorities to urgently review each detainee's case without delay and in accordance with the law, with a view to securing their release."

China's crackdown on religion continues with another church cross removal

By Lucy Westcott

The Wire (17.06.2014) - Chinese authorities completed their task of removing yet another cross from a church today, nearly a week after a group of Christians tried to stop the government's anti-church campaign.

As The Telegraph's Tom Phillips reports from Shanghai, on early Tuesday morning a red cross was removed from the top of Guantou church, located in Wenzhou, a city known as "China's Jerusalem." Last Wednesday, members of the church successfully stopped a demolition crew from removing the cross, but it was removed with a crane in secret this morning, according to Zheng Legou, a local church leader who spoke with Phillips.

There are more than 67 million Christians in China, according to the Pew Research Center, but a Chinese official for religious affairs said the spread of the religion was "too excessive and too haphazard" in an address to Communist Party members.

This morning's action has renewed fears that China is cracking down on mainstream religion as Christianity moves across the country. In April, authorities razed an entire megachurch in Wenzhou, which is known for its large Christian population, and in March 2013, the Zhejiang government launched a three-year "Three Rectifications and One Demolition" campaign to "rectify" and destroy what they considered to be "illegal structures." The United States' Congressional-Executive Commission on China released a statement on June 6 saying the program "contravenes international norms and Chinese regulations governing religious affairs."

Efforts to remove crosses and Christian symbols have been increasing in recent weeks, and around 360 church buildings and crosses have been destroyed this year, according to The Telegraph. Just how much freedom of religion China has is questionable. Technically, it's guaranteed in the constitution, but "deep in the party's narrative is a view of Christianity as a tool of Western imperialism," reports the BBC's Carrie Grace.

And it's not only Christianity that's facing a crackdown. As The Diplomat's Steve Finch reports, parallel to the destruction of Christian symbolism is the "much louder campaign against Islamic extremism by minority Uyghurs in the northwest."

China's not so secret war on religion

The Diplomat (16.06.2014) - The week starting May 18 marked a new low for religious groups in China. That Sunday, authorities quietly removed or destroyed crosses at 50 churches in Zhejiang in what appeared to be a widening campaign against Christianity in this prosperous eastern province. No mention of the campaign appeared in Chinese media.

Four days later, Islamic separatists plowed into the crowded main market in Urumqi, at the opposite end of the country in Xinjiang province, throwing explosives at innocent shoppers and killing 43 people including the five assailants themselves. The next day, Chinese authorities announced a one-year crackdown in restive Xinjiang using "extremely tough measures and extraordinary methods" following a spate of attacks including this second incident in the provincial capital in less than a month.

Although unrelated, these incidents mark a new battle against religion in China: a silent offensive against Christianity in the eastern Han heartland and a much louder campaign against Islamic extremism by minority Uyghurs in the northwest. Is it a fight the Chinese Communist Party can win?

Later the same day as the latest Urumqi attack, more than 1,000 soldiers flanking white tanks and police vehicles put on a show of strength in the Xinjiang capital as President Xi Jinping promised to "severely punish terrorists" and "crack down on them with a heavy fist."

Severe punishments have followed in Xinjiang thick and fast. On May 27, authorities held a mass trial of 55 people in Yining City stadium packed with a 7,000-strong crowd, with three of the defendants sentenced to death on charges including "violent terrorism." A week earlier, 39 people were found guilty amid scenes reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution of four decades ago. Mass trials have not been seen in China since the 1990s.

Alim Seytof, director of the Washington D.C.-based Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), says that the new campaign in Xinjiang has seen armed police and special police forces deployed from elsewhere in China in the two biggest predominantly Uyghur cities of Kashgar and Hotan.

"[They are] carrying out armed sweeps and security operations targeting Uyghurs, especially young males," he notes. "In other cities, Chinese security forces are targeting devout Uyghur religious believers, especially men with beards and women with scarves."

Beijing is blaming minority Uyghur Islamic separatist groups – the most prominent of which is the East Turkestan Islamic Movement – for at least 10 major terrorist attacks that have left more than 145 people dead in less than a year, mostly in Xinjiang.

Although the government formalized a new campaign only after the recent Urumqi attack, Seytof says authorities slowly ratcheted up a crackdown on Uyghurs in recent months with each new terrorist attack, often using measures that directly punish religious practices.

On April 16, the website of the Aksu prefectural government published details on how residents in Shayar county could be rewarded up to 50,000 yuan (\$8,000) for reporting on local residents exhibiting any one of 53 proscribed behaviors. These included separatist preaching, storing guns, or providing funding to overseas anti-government

groups, as well as people holding tabliqs, or informal religious discussions led by a layperson, or growing a long beard. Shayar, which lies close to the border with Kyrgyzstan, is 83 percent Uyghur.

Following the latest terrorist attack in Urumqi, China's state press has hinted at the growing resentment that lies at the heart of China's growing ethno-religious fighting. Generally, however, such discourse is sidelined inside the country.

Liu Lei, Xinjiang military command commissar, said in a front page article carried in the state-run China Daily the day after the attack that religious extremists in Xinjiang were typically aged as young as 10 to 25 and jobless. The rest of the article focused on addressing symptoms of Uyghur discontent – cutting off terrorist funding including from "The West," the possibility of a new Chinese terrorism law, and increased security checks in hospitals, schools and shopping malls.

"Not enough efforts are being made to solve terrorism at its roots," Ma Pinyan, deputy director of the Ethnic and Religious Study Center at Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences, told China Daily for the same article. "The ideological basis for terrorism is religious extremism. The extremists have increased their efforts to indoctrinate people."

Seytof argues that Uyghur extremism is generated by years of worsening repression. Uyghurs are treated as second-class citizens on their own land, he says, and Beijing – in trying to assimilate the population in the name of stability – is forcibly attempting to erase this minority Muslim culture, including its religion.

A vast region of deserts and bitterly cold winters that see temperatures drop to below minus 30 degrees Celsius, Xinjiang is a construct of the People's Republic of China that has variously been wholly or partly controlled by previous Chinese dynasties, Russia and various Central Asian peoples. East Turkestan, the preferred moniker for the region used by separatists, was only in existence for one year, 1933, before it was taken back by Chinese Kuomintang troops.

Strategically important, China's largest province is a key part of an economic jigsaw connecting with Central Asia via oil and gas pipelines crisscrossing the expansive Tarim Basin that dominates this remote region.

"The Uyghur resentment toward Chinese rule comes from their failure to master and change their political destiny, and the sense of being overwhelmed by millions of Chinese settlers," said Seytof.

While Chinese authorities have typically played to the majority in announcing measures against this Muslim minority, when it comes to growing crackdowns against Christianity – quite widely practiced by Han Chinese – Communist authorities have generally proven less forthcoming.

On April 28, authorities sent in bulldozers to demolish Sanjiang Church, a \$5.5 million structure in Wenzhou, Zhejiang province the local government says overstepped documented planning permission but which the congregation says these same officials orally permitted.

The little coverage the demolition has received in Chinese media has portrayed authorities treating the church even-handedly as a violator of building rules in booming Wenzhou, a port city of nine million people labeled "Jerusalem of the East" because of its large Christian community.

"All the churches that received demolition orders are illegal," an official of Wenzhou's Three-Self Patriotic Movement, China's government-sponsored Protestant church, told the state-run Global Times.

However, a document leaked and shared among Chinese Christian communities paints a picture of a systematic anti-Christian campaign in Zhejiang province this year. The document, which cannot be independently verified, details how authorities planned to identify targets including churches, unsanctioned house churches, and crosses from the start of the year until mid-February with the aim of tearing them down later this year under the pretext of building violations.

"The priority is to remove crosses at religious activity sites on both sides of expressways, national highways and provincial highways," the document says.

Aside from the 50 crosses torn down and destroyed in Zhejiang on May 18, a further 60 churches have been forced to remove crosses or have been destroyed in Zhejiang province, according to China Aid, a Texas-based Christian rights group with a network of people inside China.

House churches, which are considered illegal by the authorities, have come under increasing harassment, said China Aid, and a Christian park in Wenzhou was torn down in April.

The heightened crackdown on Christianity in Zhejiang province appears to originate with the visit of provincial party secretary Xia Balong. Reportedly unhappy with the prominence of the Sanjiang spire, which rose more than 50 meters, a month later the congregation was told to remove the cross and the battle to save the church began.

It remains unclear whether the government's fight against Christianity in Zhejiang is just policy at the provincial level, or whether as a densely populated Christian region it represents a pilot for social engineering-obsessed Beijing for a program that could be extended countrywide.

Many Christians in China say they fear the worst but are trying to remain optimistic. However, self-exiled Chinese Pastor Bob Fu, president of China Aid, says there are already signs an increasingly harsh anti-Christian campaign is spreading.

"Even other provinces such as Guizhou, Anhui and Guangdong, house churches have started receiving notices to either join the government-sanctioned church or face destruction," he observes.

At Shouwang Church in Beijing, one of the most popular unsanctioned churches in China, police have started to detain members of the congregation for upwards of seven days, say church sources, whereas previously they were held for a few hours or turned away.

Also last month, the government issued a statement banning the conversion of children at faith-based orphanages.

Signs suggest the government has become increasingly irritated by Christianity, which has historically been viewed in China as a Western-originating threat to power in Beijing.

When Fenggang Yang, director of the center of Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University, Indiana State, was quoted on April 18 claiming China would become the most populous Christian country in the World by 2030 with 247 million faithful, the party hit back six days later rubbishing the claim.

Ye Xiaowen, a member of the party's powerful central committee, told state-run media such claims were "obviously inflated" and "unscientific."

"It is completely meaningless to predict how many people might believe in Christianity in China in the future," he added in the Global Times.

Although urban migration from villages including those dominated by Christians has swelled congregation sizes at churches and cathedrals across the country – many of which have been forced to add extra services and put towers of plastic chairs outside to accommodate churchgoers, few in China doubt Christian ranks are swelling. Sheer numbers appear to be working against the party, a network of people over which it struggles to exert control.

While the government says there about 25 million Christians, most independent estimates say the real number is at least 60 million, more than the total number of churchgoers in Europe.

The Chinese Communist Party appears concerned. Last month, Beijing issued a policy-advising "Blue Book" report stating that religion posed a serious threat to national security along with Western democracy and cultural hegemony as well as the spread of information on the internet.

"Foreign religious infiltration powers have penetrated all areas of Chinese society," read the document.

Chinese media reported that this policy paper could inform the new National Security Council created in November, which held its first meeting in April.

At the very summit of government, there have been no explicit signs of a crackdown on Islam and Christianity in recent months, but few China watchers are in doubt that an apparently threatened Communist Party is clamping down on these religions.

"Recent developments indicate increased measures to control Islam and Christianity," Purdue University's Yang tells The Diplomat.

Steve Finch is a freelance journalist based in Bangkok. His work has appeared in the Washington Post, Foreign Policy, TIME, The Independent, Toronto Star and Bangkok Post among others.

Campaign to crack down on fringe sects in China worries mainstream churches

By Andrew Jacobs

NY Times (11.06.2014) /

[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/12/world/asia/china-rounds-up-hundreds-in-crackdown-on-fringe-](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/12/world/asia/china-rounds-up-hundreds-in-crackdown-on-fringe-sects.html?emc=edit_ee_20140612&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=20675095&r=1)

[sects.html?emc=edit_ee_20140612&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=20675095&r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/12/world/asia/china-rounds-up-hundreds-in-crackdown-on-fringe-sects.html?emc=edit_ee_20140612&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=20675095&r=1) - Last month, as she waited for her husband and 7-year-old son at a McDonald's in the eastern Chinese province of Shandong, Wu Shuoyan was approached by members of a Christian sect who were on an aggressive recruitment drive.

After Ms. Wu refused to give them her number, several members of the group beat and kicked her to death, an act of brutality captured by cellphone and widely shared on the Internet.

Although the Chinese public's outrage initially focused on the many bystanders who failed to intervene, the national news media has sought to shift the indignation toward what the government calls "evil cults" — the roughly two dozen outlawed religious sects often demonized by the authorities as coercive and dangerous.

In the two weeks since the killing, state-run publications have produced a steady drumbeat of alarming articles detailing what they say are the predations of the Church of Almighty God, the group blamed for the McDonald's attack. On Tuesday, the Xinhua news agency said the authorities had rounded up about 1,500 cult members, although it appears many of those were arrested as early as 2012.

"Religious cults recruit and control adherents by fabricating and spreading superstitions and heresies," the Ministry of Public Security said in a statement carried by state-run news media last Wednesday.

Decades of blistering propaganda attacks against such groups have convinced much of the Chinese public that adherents of so-called cults deserve little sympathy. In the case of Falun Gong, the quasi-spiritual movement whose members once numbered in the millions and included high-ranking officials, even possessing a piece of literature for the group can lead to brutal treatment by the police and jail time.

Although their voices are muted by the censors, human rights advocates and some mainstream religious leaders in China say that the latest anticult campaign is misguided and that it frequently violates Chinese law.

Teng Biao, a defense lawyer who has represented Falun Gong members in the past, said the most recent roundups were politically motivated by the government's deeply rooted fear of organized religion, especially groups it cannot control. "This is an effort to eradicate an entire group of believers, not just the ones who committed crimes," he said.

The breadth of the newest campaign is hard to gauge. Xinhua's report said that among those arrested, 59 had already been handed prison terms of up to four years for "using a cult to undermine enforcement of the law."

In addition to adherents of the Church of Almighty God, the agency said, those arrested included members of another Christian group known as Disciples Sect. But other news accounts said that many of the 1,500 arrests took place in 2012, during a previous drive against Almighty God that began after its members frightened the public with warnings of a coming apocalypse.

Perhaps most alarming to the Chinese leadership is the group's determination to slay the "Great Red Dragon," a reference to the ruling Communist Party.

Despite its reputation for coercive proselytizing that critics describe as brainwashing, the group is not known for violence, and experts suggested that the McDonald's killing was the work of a deranged individual.

During a jailhouse confession shown last week by the national broadcaster CCTV, the man described as the ringleader of the attack, Zhang Lidong, was emotionless and unrepentant. An unemployed medicine salesman, he said the victim had been a "monster" and an "evil spirit" who deserved to die. "We are not afraid of the law," he said. "We have faith in God."

Among the six people arrested at the scene were three of his children, including a 12-year-old boy.

Despite periodic efforts to rein in unorthodox Christian sects, the appeal of such faiths continues to endure. Some experts say Almighty God, also known as Eastern Lightning, may have up to a million members in China, many of them in rural areas. Founded in 1989 in the northeastern province of Heilongjiang by Zhao Weishan, the church is fixated on doomsday scenarios, and its members believe that God has returned to Earth as a Chinese woman. After the sect was banned in 1995, Mr. Zhao, a physics teacher, reportedly fled to the United States. His location is unknown, and he has not made any public statements about the killing.

Leaders of many mainstream Christian churches have condemned the sect for its teachings and heavy-handed recruitment methods. Wu Chi-wai, general secretary of the Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement, said he had heard stories from mainland Chinese pastors who said that Almighty God members sometimes kidnap or lure adherents from other churches by inviting them to religious seminars.

"It is not accepted by traditional churches, including the Protestant and Catholic churches, because it doesn't let people accept Jesus Christ," he said in a telephone interview on Wednesday from Hong Kong, where the group is allowed to proselytize. "They claim they have a woman who is more successful than Jesus Christ."

Still, some Chinese religious leaders worry that campaigns against heterodox groups will spill over and affect congregations that are doctrinally mainstream but unsanctioned by the Communist Party, which seeks to manage all religious activity.

It is unclear whether those arrested in the latest sweep will have access to legal defenders. In the past, the handful of lawyers who have stepped forward to represent those accused of cult activity have faced harassment. One lawyer, Wang Quanzhang, was jailed for several days last year after a court in Jiangsu Province accused him of disrupting proceedings during the trial of a defendant who was a Falun Gong member.

Mr. Wang said the vilification and prosecution of so-called cults were deeply flawed because the decision to outlaw a particular group was subjective and lacked independent oversight.

"People shouldn't be arrested for their beliefs," Mr. Wang said. "But if there is proof, for example, that someone has indeed killed or injured others, then they should be prosecuted."

Correction: June 16, 2014

An article on Thursday about a renewed campaign by the authorities in China to condemn outlawed religious sects after a woman was beaten to death by members of one such sect, the Church of Almighty God, misstated part of an alternative name for the sect. It is Eastern Lightning, not Eastern Lightening.

Four detained for training program in Xinjiang; two submit administrative reconsideration plea

China Aid (03.06.2014) / <http://www.chinaaid.org/2014/06/four-detained-for-training-program-in.html> - Four worshippers in China's far west Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region were taken into custody in March when local police broke up a training program

at a nursing home with about 30 attendees; two of the detainees, since their release, submitted administrative reconsideration applications.

"On March 21, when their training program was in its seventh day, police officers from the local police station all went [to the nursing home] and took all the people to the police station," a Christian named Li said. "Three people were placed under a 15-day administrative detention. The person in charge of the church was also detained 15 days later. An American pastor who attended the activities was driven out of Xinjiang." Li said that several dozen policemen were present when the event was dispersed.

"The local worshippers said that after the incident, the nursing home was fined 10,000 yuan (US \$1,598), and the authorities confiscated 10,000 yuan [that had been paid by residents to the nursing home]," Ms. Li said. "The American priest was fined 800 yuan (\$127)... His fine was paid by the nursing home."

"On that night, police took [the American pastor and a translator] to a hotel for foreigners," Li said. "On the second day, the police let him leave by plane."

"Not long after the three [detainees] were released, the police told the brother in charge [of the training program] to go to the police station," Li said. "There, the people from the Xinjiang Ministry of State Security had a talk with him. After the talk, they detained him."

Li said that two of four detainees were planning to file for administrative reconsiderations, but that the other two are "afraid that the authorities would retaliate against them."

Xinjiang: more than 200 Uighurs arrested in connection with the Urumqi attack

The government announces the results of the raid launched after Thursday's attack at the Urumqi Railway Station. Some 23 extremist groups have been broken up and more than 200 explosive devices seized. Islamist ideology is spreading to the province through the internet.

AsiaNews/Agencies (26.05.2014) /

<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Xinjiang:-more-than-200-Uighurs-arrested-in-connection-with-the-Urumqi-attack-31183.html> - More than 200 people were arrested and 23 extremist groups broken, state media report after Chinese authorities launched a massive campaign in Xinjiang province, following an attack at Urumqi railway station on Thursday that left 34 people dead.

According to the *Xinhua* news agency, police arrested many suspects in their 20s and 30s since Friday.

They learnt how to make explosives through the internet and undertook physical training by watching online videos. Equally, they used text messages and social media to chat about how to make explosives and spread "jihad".

During their crackdown, police also seized more than 200 explosive devices. For the authorities, those responsible for the spread of Islamic extremism are all ethnic Uighurs, with contacts in Turkmenistan. All those arrested were also Uighurs.

For years, Xinjiang, a region inhabited by the Uyghur, a Turkic Muslim ethnic minority, has been rocked by riots and tensions. The Uighurs accuse Beijing of colonising their homeland and demand greater autonomy.

The government, which has moved millions of ethnic Han Chinese settlers to Xinjiang and boosted its military presence, has accuses Uighurs of separatism and Islamic terrorism.

In order to end the violence, the authorities have been quick to impose the death penalty and have denied local Muslims their religious freedom.

In a previous incident at the end of April, two suspected suicide bombers detonated explosives at the exit to the Urumqi train station, killing themselves and one other person. Another eight people attacked passengers with knives, leaving 79 injured.

The violence came just a few hours after President Xi Jinping ended his visit to the region.

In recent months, attacks with bombs and knives have also occurred in Guangzhou and Kunming, which the government don Islamic separatists in Xinjiang.

Zhejiang: more crosses and churches demolished. Domestic and official Churches persecuted

AsiaNews (20.05.2014) /

<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Zhejiang:-more-crosses-and-churches-demolished.-Domestic-and-official-Churches-persecuted-31127.html> -

A Catholic Way of the Cross destroyed, domestic communities shut down and scattered. Officially, it is to "beautify" the city by destroying buildings held to be "illegal". But the real reason is that it is an attempt to eliminate anything that contrasts the Party's power and seize land for property development . Religions are the biggest threat to society (ie the Party). A Protestant minister: You can destroy a building, but not the church as a community.

A source for *AsiaNews* in China has sent us a new list of crosses and religious buildings that have been demolished in the region of Zhejiang. After the destruction of the church of Sanjiang in Wenzhou, the campaign against crosses and buildings deemed to be overly flashy is gaining ground and targeting Protestants and Catholics buildings, of official and underground churches (see photo). Among the photos there is also an ordinance ordering the closure of a local church and the prohibition on the faithful to gather.

Two days before the bulldozers tore down the imposing (Protestant) church of Sanjiang, it was the turn of the Catholic shrine of Longgang, where authorities destroyed many statues that were part of the Way of the Cross, forcing the faithful to transfer the larger statues to a warehouse. The central pavilion, occupied by statues of Christ, the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph was walled to hide the religious symbols from view. Also in this case the reason given was that the constructions are "illegal".

Since 2013, when Zhejiang was slated to become a hub of economic development by 2020, a campaign has been enacted to "beautify " the region by removing the illegal structures . The campaign is called the "Rectify Three, Demolish One" campaign intended to halt violation of building regulations, a move to "make space for development. According to the provincial government these demolitions affect all communities and private dwellings without distinction. But it is a fact that the campaign is targeting mainly Christian sites.

The faithful note that the demolition notices began to circulate after Xia Baolong , party secretary of Zhejiang earlier this year inspected a church in Baiquan and noted it had a cross that towered "too obviously", deeming it offensive to the eye. On later seeing a forest of crosses in the skyline in other cities, he gave the order to "rectify " the situation. Since then, tearing down crosses, destroying statues and razing churches has become the Party's most conspicuous task.

Crosses were torn down in Hangzhou, Yongjia County and in neighboring Anhui. The "advice" of the Party was not to position the crosses on the spire, rather at the foot of the building, on the walls, or even better, inside the church.

The government defends itself by saying that all those crosses and demolished buildings violated building codes and that, before their forced destruction, the communities were given time to rectify the error. But the faithful denounce that the notice was impossibly short : the church of Sanjiang , only had 4 days for "rectification", in short, to destroy over 500 "illegal" square meters.

The fact that the demolition of churches is part of a wider plan was clearly revealed by the Secretary Xia Baolong who, in an interview with Xinhua on the 17th of February, denounced that "hostile forces of the West" had infiltrated the Christian communities . And in July 2013 he warned the Party of Wenzhou against the influence of the underground community.

Almost as if to confirm these "concerns", on 6 May the University of International Relations and the Academy of Social Sciences published a "Blue Book". It states that all religions pose one of the biggest challenges to national security and that "hostile western forces are infiltrating the religions of China".

In one of the photos featured in the sequence linked to this article, there is a notice in which the authorities order the closure of an underground house church, which gathered in an apartment. The orders are as follows:

- 1) An immediate stop to all religious practices;
- 2) Removal of all religious objects from the building;
- 3) Dismissal of all participants in the services.

The same applies to several underground Catholic communities.

It seems that the Chinese government fear the prediction of some academics, that by 2025 China will be the country with the most Christians in the world, with about 165 million faithful. This "prophecy", based on sociological projections was made by Yanggang Yang, a professor of sociology at Purdue University (Indiana, USA).

The hostility toward Christians is not so much ideological, rooted as it were on the old Marxist schemes. It is fuelled by economic reasons and lust for power: removing land and buildings from Christians to feed the hunger for space and building speculation; it reduces their visibility and unity and furthermore, avoids them becoming stakeholders in the play for power. Increasingly, in fact, Christians become human rights activists, engaged in civil society against corruption, oppression , violence , pollution, all the plagues that the Communist Party of China Xi Jinping said it would fight without having ever changed a thing, other than targeting political enemies.

It is worth noting that in 2003-2004 a campaign was launched in Zhejiang to demolish hundreds of churches . Since then, the community of Zhejiang and Wenzhou have grown

even more and now the Christians are about 15% of the population of the city of 9 million inhabitants.

Their strength lies in faith and not in buildings. One of them, Pastor Yang, commenting on the destruction of the church of Sangjiang said: "When it comes to our faith, the word jiaohui (church, congregation, fellowship) is not the same as jiaotang (church building). It may be possible to deal violently with a jiaotang, but not with the jiaohui. Christians shouldn't be so sad. Maybe this is a good time to reflect and wonder if we have put too much focus on church buildings. With this jiaotang now destroyed, we should focus our efforts on building the jiaohui".

China's relations with Muslim Uighurs worsen as tensions rise after attacks

By William Wan

The Washington Post (09.05.2014) - After a string of brazen attacks attributed to - Islamist extremists, Chinese authorities have ratcheted up surveillance of and restrictions on Muslim Uighurs as their relations with the large minority population continue to deteriorate.

In the past week, Chinese authorities have clashed with residents of the restive western province of Xinjiang, sentenced others to prison and announced new measures that critics say amount to religious and ethnic persecution.

Police fatally shot one person and captured another Thursday in an area of Xinjiang that has seen some of the worst clashes, according to state media. In a statement distributed by the state-controlled Xinhua News Agency, police said that during a police stop, suspects attacked an officer and threw explosive devices at a patrol car.

Meanwhile, state media in the Xinjiang city of Kashgar said five people have been sentenced to prison for inciting separatism and endangering state security. As their sentences were announced, ranging from seven to 15 years, more than 300 local party members and students applauded, state media said.

Authorities said the five who were found guilty had purchased data flash cards containing extremist or jihadist material and disseminated them electronically. The five were also accused of setting up illegal groups to teach fundamentalist religious thought to youths.

For years, many Uighurs and other, smaller Muslim minorities in Xinjiang have agitated against China's authoritarian government. Their protests are a reaction, Uighur groups say, to oppressive official policies, including religious restrictions and widespread discrimination.

The government has long denied oppressing Uighurs or any other ethnic group and has blamed terrorist acts on separatist Muslims who want to make Xinjiang an independent state.

Ethnic rioting and clashes in Xinjiang reached a peak in 2009, resulting in roughly 200 deaths and triggering a crackdown by local authorities. Renewed protests last year also turned violent and are thought to have claimed more than 100 lives.

Recent attacks have led to heightened vigilance throughout Xinjiang. Kashgar, for example, has been described in recent days by local media as a city on lockdown. According to the Xinjiang Daily News, Communist Party members and local companies, schools and community groups have been recruited to act as 24-hour "security watchers," backing up round-the-clock police surveillance.

In southern Xinjiang's Aksu prefecture, where most residents are Uighur, Chinese authorities are trying monetary rewards to persuade residents to inform on each other. A notice dated April 16 that was posted on the official Web site of Aksu's Shayar County listed at least 36 types of useful information and offered rewards of between \$8 and \$8,000.

The notice appears to have been removed since it was reported by some Chinese and foreign media. According to a screen shot provided by the Washington-based Uyghur Human Rights Project, authorities offered rewards for informing on activities such as prayer in public places; disputes between members of ethnic minorities and Han Chinese; and people with bizarre dress or long beards, as well as foreigners.

Aksu is one of Xinjiang's most heavily guarded areas and has seen many clashes in the past. In February, about a dozen people armed with knives and explosive devices reportedly attacked police on patrol. Eight were fatally shot by police and three others killed in the suicide bombing, state media reported. A month earlier, six people were shot when they attacked a local police station.

"The Chinese authorities' intensified drive to repress religious practice and belief among Uyghurs has led to a marked decline for religious freedom in the past year," said Uyghur Human Rights Project director Alim Seytoff.

By conflating extremism and terrorism with regular Uighur customs such as wearing long beards and with religious practices such as praying, the government has decided that "nearly every Uighur is complicit in 'illegal religious activity' and forces Uighur believers to abandon their faith in order to avoid state punishment," Seytoff said.

Some experts on Chinese terrorism disagree, however, saying that such measures are not targeting religion but responding, of necessity, to a growing terrorist threat. Li Wei, director of the anti-terrorism center at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, said that many countries encourage their residents to report suspicious activities.

"We should not mix terrorism with issues of ethnicity and religion," Li said. "That's what terrorists want."

The heightened tensions come after an explosion and attack at a train station in Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi, last week at the end of Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to the region. The attack killed three and injured at least 79.

On Tuesday, six people were injured in a knife attack at the Guangzhou railway station in the southern province of Guangdong. Initial witness reports on Chinese social media described several men in white hats similar to those traditionally worn by Muslims, but local authorities have not identified the attackers.

In March, an attack by knife-wielding assailants at a train station in southern China left 33 people dead and more than 100 injured.

In Xinjiang last week, Xi urged authorities to respond to the recent attacks with increased pressure, saying Chinese must "make terrorists become like rats scurrying across a street, with everybody shouting, 'Beat them!'" state media reported.

China destroys statues as 'anti-Christian' campaign widens

Chinese Catholics weep as statues depicting the Passion of Christ are removed or hidden from public view in what they say is reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution

By Tom Phillips

The Telegraph (01.05.2014) / <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10800404/China-destroys-statues-as-anti-Christian-campaign-widens.html> - Holy statues depicting Biblical scenes including Jesus' crucifixion have been destroyed, removed or "hidden" by authorities in a city known as China's Jerusalem, it has emerged, fuelling fears of a renewed government offensive against Christianity.

Around 50 government workers sealed off Wenzhou's Longgang Hill, a site of Catholic pilgrimage, on Saturday and used bricks to "hide" statues portraying moments from the Passion of Christ.

Statues of Jesus, the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph, each weighing up to five tons, were "bricked around to hide them from public view" while cranes were used to remove other holy statues and tablets from the park. "All other religious decoration was demolished," **according to UCA News**, a news agency covering Catholic issues in Asia.

"About 100 Catholics who came to watch the removals were blocked at the entrance," said one witness, who asked not to be named because of "security concerns". "Some who managed to sneak in sang hymns and prayed while watching. Some could not hold back their tears."

"The authorities' behaviour is reminiscent of the smashing of church property during the Cultural Revolution," another member of the city's Catholic community told UCA News' Chinese-language service.

The removals, which were first reported on Thursday night, took place last Saturday, 48 hours before government demolition teams razed a Protestant church in the same city.

Wenzhou's Sanjiang church became a symbol of resistance to the Communist Party's draconian religious policies in early April. Thousands of Christians formed a human shield around the place of worship after plans to demolish it were announced but the building was eventually levelled on Monday evening.

Christians accuse Communist Party leaders in Zhejiang province of attempting to slow their faith's rapid growth by destroying churches deemed too "conspicuous".

A list that was compiled by Christian activists and shown to The Telegraph this week names more than 20 churches that are facing or have already suffered some form of demolition work.

Officials deny the demolitions are an attack on Christianity, claiming their campaign is aimed at illegal constructions "including factories and Buddhist temples".

Authorities would "aggressively push on with the demolition of illegal buildings," the state-controlled Zhejiang Daily reported this week.

The motive for what appeared to be a "widening crackdown" was unknown but "an increasingly violent standoff between authorities and the church" was now under way, UCA News reported.

Four Catholics were beaten and injured by government officials in Wenzhou last week when an argument broke out during the forced demolition of one church, the news agency claimed.

China denies church demolition is persecution of Christians

CNN (01.05.2014) - A massive church was razed to the ground this week in Wenzhou, a coastal Chinese city nicknamed the "Jerusalem of the East" for its large Christian population.

Local officials responsible for the demolition say the church was an illegal structure that was four times the permitted structure size. But Christian groups are concerned that the demolition signals an official campaign against religious organizations.

The Sanjiang Church took 12 years and 30 million yuan (\$4.7 million) to build, reports Chinese media. Its soaring spires were a symbol of worship in a city that is fifteen percent Christian.

The church's demolition on Monday was preceded by a month-long standoff between supporters of the church and local authorities, with supporters occupying the church to protest its destruction.

The church was originally a government-approved project under the official "Three-Self Patriotic Movement," a state-sanctioned Protestant church. Last September it was lauded by the local government as a model engineering project.

But the official rhetoric has since changed entirely.

Jin Leibo, a spokesperson from the propaganda department of Yongjia County, where Sanjiang Church was located, told CNN that the church was destroyed as it was "illegal."

"The building area should be within 1,881 square meters, but they built 7,928 square meters illegally," Jin said. The church was asked to "self-rectify" by April 22, but workers only managed to tear down 500 square meters by deadline, according to officials.

By Monday evening the church had been flattened by bulldozers.

Five local government officials are currently under investigation in relation to the illegal construction of the church, according to Jin. One official was arrested, and another is in custody.

Representatives of the church could not be reached for comment by CNN.

U.S.-based Christian rights group China Aid says the faithful are worried that the church demolition could be a sign that the government is tightening its grip over the spread of Christianity in China.

The organization claims that churches in different parts of Wenzhou and Hangzhou are currently "facing persecution" as a result of a provincial campaign against religious structures that was set into motion after Zhejiang Party Secretary Xia Baolong visited churches across the province and deemed them "too conspicuous."

Under Communist Party rule since 1949, China is officially an atheist country, but Christianity is growing. According to the Pew Research Center, China's Christian population had reached 67 million by 2010, the second largest in Asia.

China blames religious extremists for station bombing

By Michael Martina

Reuters (01.05.2014) - An attack at a train station in China's western city of Urumqi was carried out by two religious extremists, who both died in the blast, the government said on Thursday.

Three people were killed, including the assailants, and 79 wounded in a bomb and knife attack at the station on Wednesday, according to the government and state media, as President Xi Jinping was wrapping up a visit to the area.

The Xinjiang regional government said on its official news website (www.ts.cn) that the two attackers who were killed had "long been influenced by extremist religious thought and participated in extremist religious activities".

It identified one of them as Sedierring Shawuti, a 39-year-old man from Xayar county in Xinjiang's Aksu region. The man is a member of the Muslim Uighur minority, judging by his name.

It did not identify the other person. The third person who was killed was a bystander, the government said.

The People's Daily, the official newspaper of the ruling Chinese Communist Party, said earlier on its microblog that "two mobsters set off bombs on their bodies and died".

But the newspaper did not call it a suicide bombing.

Xinjiang, resource-rich and strategically located on the borders of central Asia, has been beset by violence for years, blamed by the government on Islamist militants and separatists.

Exiles and many rights groups say the real cause of the unrest is China's heavy-handed policies, including curbs on Islam and the culture and language of the Uighur people.

The Wednesday blast was the first bomb attack in the capital of Xinjiang region in 17 years. It came soon after the arrival of a train from a mainly Han Chinese province, state media said.

The Xinhua news agency earlier cited police as saying "knife-wielding mobs" slashed at people at an exit of the station and set off explosives.

The bombing was possibly timed to coincide with a visit to the region with a large Muslim minority by President Xi, when security was likely to have been heavy.

On Thursday, dozens of police vans were parked around the station, while camouflaged police with assault rifles patrolled its entrance. Despite the security, the station was busy and appeared to be operating normally.

The government called the attackers "terrorists", a term it uses to describe Islamist militants and separatists in Xinjiang who have waged a sometimes violent campaign for an independent East Turkestan state.

State media did not say if Xi, who was wrapping up his visit to the region, was anywhere near Urumqi at the time.

Pan Zhiping, a retired expert on Central Asia at Xinjiang's Academy of Social Science, described the attack as well organized, saying it was timed to coincide with Xi's visit.

"It is very clear that they are challenging the Chinese government," he said.

"There was a time last year when they were targeting the public security bureau, the police stations and the troops. Now it's indiscriminate - terrorist activities are conducted in places where people gather the most."

There has been no claim of responsibility.

In remarks released on Thursday from Xi's trip to Xinjiang, the president urged troops there to "strike crushing blows against violent terrorist forces and resolutely strike against terrorists who are swollen with arrogance".

"Resolutely crush the space for terrorist activities and contain the spreading trend of escalation," Xi said.

"Act of defiance"

Nicholas Bequelin, a senior researcher at New York-based Human Rights Watch who follows developments in Xinjiang, called the attack "an unprecedented act of defiance from Uighurs who oppose the Chinese state".

"It's hugely significant and it's extremely politically embarrassing for Xi Jinping who has taken a very hard stance on the Xinjiang issue, and made a big show while visiting Xinjiang that Xinjiang is safe for the Han," he said.

It was also the largest militant attack in Urumqi since the government blamed Uighurs for stabbing hundreds of Han Chinese with needles in 2009.

No one was killed in that incident, but it led to protests demanding the removal of the region's top official for failing to protect Han people, China's majority ethnic group.

Earlier that year, almost 200 people died in ethnic riots in Urumqi. Bombs on buses there killed nine people in 1997.

The city is heavily populated by Han Chinese, who have flooded there seeking business opportunities. Uighurs have complained that they have been frozen out of the job market.

"I just don't believe it was a Uighur who did this," said one 35-year-old Uighur man selling dried fruit about 100 meters from the blast site. "These public spaces aren't safe for anyone, Uighur or Han."

Exiles blame heavy-handed rule

The attack came on the eve of a two-day Labour Day holiday, a time of heavy travel in China.

"Everyone was running and hiding. I was terrified," said Li Tianlin, a 53-year-old laborer. "We are still afraid and don't dare go over to the train station."

Exiles and rights groups say the cause of unrest in Xinjiang is heavy-handed rule by authorities, including curbs on Islam and the culture and language of the Uighur people.

Xinhua condemned the spokesman for the German-based World Uyghur Congress exile group for saying that "such incidents could happen again at any time".

The spokesman, Dilxat Raxit, said in a email that more than 100 Uighurs had been detained since the attack, adding that Xi's visit was being used by the government an excuse to step up "armed repression" in Xinjiang.

"Any provocation by China will directly inflame the situation and further worsen the unrest," he said.

Luo Fuyong, a spokesman for the Xinjiang government, rejected Raxit's accusations. "This is deliberate hostile rumor-mongering," Luo told Reuters by telephone.

Wednesday's attack was the latest in a spate of violence blamed by the government on Uighur militants.

In March, 29 people were stabbed to death in the southwestern city of Kunming. Five months earlier, a car ploughed into tourists on the edge of Beijing's Tiananmen Square, killing the car's three occupants and two bystanders.

Unrest in Xinjiang has caused the death of more than 100 people in the past year.

Fears for China's churches as Christianity rises

By Tom Phillips

The Telegraph (30.04.2014) - It is impossible to visit Wenzhou, a bustling port city known as the Jerusalem of the East, without noticing the crosses.

Bright red and in some cases taller than houses, they thrust into the sky from roof tops, domes and spires – a constant reminder of Christianity's rapid spread in this officially atheist nation.

Recently, however, the crosses appear to have become too visible for Beijing's liking.

On Monday night excavators laid waste to one of the city's largest places of worship, the state-sanctioned Sanjiang church, amid accusations that the Communist Party was preparing to launch a nationwide assault against Christianity.

At least 10 churches here in Zhejiang province have been ordered to remove their eye-catching red crosses or are facing partial or total demolition, activists claim. Already this month two churches, one Catholic, one Protestant, have been razed.

Communist Party officials insist the demolitions are a matter of planning permission not religious persecution.

Yet whatever the truth, the highly symbolic destruction of Sanjiang, a state-approved congregation, has underlined escalating tensions between an increasing large and assertive Church and a Communist Party that appears less and less tolerant of those groups it sees as a threat to its power.

Exactly 25 years ago, hawks and doves within the Party leadership debated how to deal with mass protests that had broken out in Tiananmen Square and hundreds of other Chinese cities.

Some, like Zhao Ziyang, China's reform-minded General Secretary, advocated a conciliatory approach, noting that the students' calls for an end to corruption were in line with the party's own pledges. Others pushed for an iron-fisted response, claiming the protests had been whipped up by hostile foreign forces intent on toppling the Party.

"This clearly is a planned, organised conspiracy," said Li Ximing, Beijing's conservative mayor, according to leaked documents published in the Tiananmen papers.

A quarter of a century on from those debates - eventually and fatefully won by the hardliners - the Party appears similarly split over religion and Christianity in particular.

Some leaders are said to share Prime Minister David Cameron's newfound enthusiasm for the faith as a weapon against spiritual and moral collapse. But as with the 1989 protests, many others view Christianity as a "hostile" and "foreign" danger that needs to be stamped out.

Foreign missionaries were forced from China following the Communist takeover in 1949 and the Party's deep suspicion of proselytising outsiders appears to have changed little since then.

A high-level government directive, leaked in late 2012, ordered universities chiefs to guard against a gang of "US-led Western countries" which were "infiltrating" Chinese campuses and "using religion to carry out their political plot to westernise and divide China".

China's Protestant and Catholic communities – now thought to number anywhere between 25 and 100 million people - enjoy incomparably more freedom than during the three decades that followed Chairman Mao's 1949 Revolution.

But the bar was set very low by years of destruction and persecution in which pastors and priests were routinely beaten, thrown into jail and even tortured as their places of worship were closed or ransacked.

Even today, the only legal way to worship legally is inside state-controlled churches run by the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TPSM) or the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA). Chinese citizens are forbidden from attending foreign-run churches where overseas priests might preach inconvenient sections of the Bible.

Thaddeus Ma Daqin, a Catholic bishop in Shanghai, has effectively been under house arrest since he spoke out against the Party's stranglehold on religion in 2012. Earlier this month a government official accused the bishop of acting "under the influence of foreigners".

The significance of this week's church demolition remains unclear, with observers divided on whether it was the result of a regional grudge against Christianity or a direct order from Beijing.

However, some within the Christian community fear Beijing is gearing up for a nationwide anti-church campaign designed to halt the advance of what they view as troublesome "foreign" movement.

Young Chinese often saw Christianity as "very fresh, modern and attractive" but many senior Communists regarded it as "a sickness" that posed a potentially fatal threat to the Party's health, said one underground "house church" leader.

As congregations swell - a leading expert recently predicted China would become the world's biggest Christian congregation by 2030 - and the profile and influence of churchgoers changes with the conversion of younger, more educated urban believers, so too do these fears.

Fenggang Yang, the head of Purdue University's Centre on Religion and Chinese Society, said Chinese Christians would face growing pressure from Beijing in the coming decade, likening the situation to the Roman Empire's Great Persecution of Christians in the 10 years leading up to the AD313 Edict of Milan.

That may be putting it too strongly, but the destruction of Sanjiang church has done nothing to improve the Communist Party's long-strained relations with the Church.

There was now an urgent need for greater dialogue between churches and the government, the underground leader argued. "We have to build up trust. The mistrust is a very, very big issue."

At Wenzhou's Sanjiang church any trust was obliterated this week as government demolition teams took just hours to level a place of worship that had taken years of work and millions of pounds to build.

After being spied on and harassed by local officials and police who had sought to hide the demolition from the public eye, congregants woke up on Tuesday morning to find their church reduced to a heap of rubble.

"They should respect our faith," said one congregant. "Politics is so complicated, especially in China. We can say nothing more."

China on course to become 'world's most Christian nation' within 15 years

The number of Christians in Communist China is growing so steadily that it by 2030 it could have more churchgoers than America

By Tom Phillips, Liushi, Zhejiang province

The Telegraph (19.04.2014) - It is said to be China's biggest church and on Easter Sunday thousands of worshippers will flock to this Asian mega-temple to pledge their allegiance - not to the Communist Party, but to the Cross.

The 5,000-capacity Liushi church, which boasts more than twice as many seats as Westminster Abbey and a 206ft crucifix that can be seen for miles around, opened last year with one theologian declaring it a "miracle that such a small town was able to build such a grand church".

The £8 million building is also one of the most visible symbols of Communist China's breakneck conversion as it evolves into one of the largest Christian congregations on earth.

"It is a wonderful thing to be a follower of Jesus Christ. It gives us great confidence," beamed Jin Hongxin, a 40-year-old visitor who was admiring the golden cross above Liushi's altar in the lead up to Holy Week.

"If everyone in China believed in Jesus then we would have no more need for police stations. There would be no more bad people and therefore no more crime," she added.

Officially, the People's Republic of China is an atheist country but that is changing fast as many of its 1.3 billion citizens seek meaning and spiritual comfort that neither communism nor capitalism seem to have supplied.

Christian congregations in particular have skyrocketed since churches began reopening when Chairman Mao's death in 1976 signalled the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Less than four decades later, some believe China is now poised to become not just the world's number one economy but also its most numerous Christian nation.

"By my calculations China is destined to become the largest Christian country in the world very soon," said Fenggang Yang, a professor of sociology at Purdue University and author of *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*.

"It is going to be less than a generation. Not many people are prepared for this dramatic change."

China's Protestant community, which had just one million members in 1949, has already overtaken those of countries more commonly associated with an evangelical boom. In 2010 there were more than 58 million Protestants in China compared to 40 million in Brazil and 36 million in South Africa, according to the Pew Research Centre's Forum on Religion and Public Life.

Prof Yang, a leading expert on religion in China, believes that number will swell to around 160 million by 2025. That would likely put China ahead even of the United States, which had around 159 million Protestants in 2010 but whose congregations are in decline.

By 2030, China's total Christian population, including Catholics, would exceed 247 million, placing it above Mexico, Brazil and the United States as the largest Christian congregation in the world, he predicted.

"Mao thought he could eliminate religion. He thought he had accomplished this," Prof Yang said. "It's ironic - they didn't. They actually failed completely."

Like many Chinese churches, the church in the town of Liushi, 200 miles south of Shanghai in Zhejiang province, has had a turbulent history.

It was founded in 1886 after William Edward Soothill, a Yorkshire-born missionary and future Oxford University professor, began evangelising local communities.

But by the late 1950s, as the region was engulfed by Mao's violent anti-Christian campaigns, it was forced to close.

Liushi remained shut throughout the decade of the Cultural Revolution that began in 1966, as places of worship were destroyed across the country.

Since it reopened in 1978 its congregation has gone from strength to strength as part of China's officially sanctioned Christian church - along with thousands of others that have accepted Communist Party oversight in return for being allowed to worship.

Today it has 2,600 regular churchgoers and holds up to 70 baptisms each year, according to Shi Xiaoli, its 27-year-old preacher. The parish's revival reached a crescendo last year with the opening of its new 1,500ft mega-church, reputedly the biggest in mainland China.

"Our old church was small and hard to find," said Ms Shi. "There wasn't room in the old building for all the followers, especially at Christmas and at Easter. The new one is big and eye-catching."

The Liushi church is not alone. From Yunnan province in China's balmy southwest to Liaoning in its industrial northeast, congregations are booming and more Chinese are thought to attend Sunday services each week than do Christians across the whole of Europe.

A recent study found that online searches for the words "Christian Congregation" and "Jesus" far outnumbered those for "The Communist Party" and "Xi Jinping", China's president.

Among China's Protestants are also many millions who worship at illegal underground "house churches", which hold unsupervised services - often in people's homes - in an attempt to evade the prying eyes of the Communist Party.

Such churches are mostly behind China's embryonic missionary movement - a reversal of roles after the country was for centuries the target of foreign missionaries. Now it is starting to send its own missionaries abroad, notably into North Korea, in search of souls.

"We want to help and it is easier for us than for British, South Korean or American missionaries," said one underground church leader in north China who asked not to be named.

The new spread of Christianity has the Communist Party scratching its head.

"The child suddenly grew up and the parents don't know how to deal with the adult," the preacher, who is from China's illegal house-church movement, said.

Some officials argue that religious groups can provide social services the government cannot, while simultaneously helping reverse a growing moral crisis in a land where cash, not Communism, has now become king.

They appear to agree with David Cameron, the British prime minister, who said last week that Christianity could help boost Britain's "spiritual, physical and moral" state.

Ms Shi, Liushi's preacher, who is careful to describe her church as "patriotic", said: "We have two motivations: one is our gospel mission and the other is serving society. Christianity can also play a role in maintaining peace and stability in society. Without God, people can do as they please."

Yet others within China's leadership worry about how the religious landscape might shape its political future, and its possible impact on the Communist Party's grip on power, despite the clause in the country's 1982 constitution that guarantees citizens the right to engage in "normal religious activities".

As a result, a close watch is still kept on churchgoers, and preachers are routinely monitored to ensure their sermons do not diverge from what the Party considers acceptable.

In Liushi church a closed circuit television camera hangs from the ceiling, directly in front of the lectern.

"They want the pastor to preach in a Communist way. They want to train people to practice in a Communist way," said the house-church preacher, who said state churches often shunned potentially subversive sections of the Bible. The Old Testament book in which the exiled Daniel refuses to obey orders to worship the king rather than his own god is seen as "very dangerous", the preacher added.

Such fears may not be entirely unwarranted. Christians' growing power was on show earlier this month when thousands flocked to defend a church in Wenzhou, a city known as the "Jerusalem of the East", after government threats to demolish it. Faced with the congregation's very public show of resistance, officials appear to have backed away from their plans, negotiating a compromise with church leaders.

"They do not trust the church, but they have to tolerate or accept it because the growth is there," said the church leader. "The number of Christians is growing - they cannot fight it. They do not want the 70 million Christians to be their enemy."

The underground church leader said many government officials viewed religion as "a sickness" that needed curing, and Prof Yang agreed there was a potential threat.

The Communist Party was "still not sure if Christianity would become an opposition political force" and feared it could be used by "Western forces to overthrow the Communist political system", he said.

Churches were likely to face an increasingly "intense" struggle over coming decade as the Communist Party sought to stifle Christianity's rise, he predicted.

"There are people in the government who are trying to control the church. I think they are making the last attempt to do that."

TSPM pastor's trial in Henan adjourned until further notice, lawyers held in courtroom for 2 hours

China Aid (16.04.2014) / <http://www.chinaaid.org/2014/04/tspm-pastors-trial-in-henan-adjourned.html> - The long-awaited trial of a detained pastor in China's central Henan province began on Thursday, only to have court proceedings indefinitely suspended due to extreme tension and the defendant's last-resort dismissal of his lawyers.

While the hearing took place, Nanle County was under a complete lockdown, including a curfew for all residents and guards stationed at every intersection in the county. Only two of Pastor Zhang Shaojie's family members were allowed to attend the trial, and a U.S. Embassy official was barred from the courtroom.

On Friday, Zhang's family issued a statement regarding his decision to fire his lawyers during the court session. It read: "During the trial of Zhang Shaojie, the lawyers Liu Weiguo and Zhao Yonglin argued on the basis of reason and performed a magnificent job...The court flew into a rage...and detained them... They are under great pressure and in danger of losing their lawyers' license!

"When we, the family, learned this, we proposed to fire them in order to let them keep their jobs. We don't do this willingly, but we really have no other choice. This is our declaration in order to clarify all types of speculation in the outside world. Our thanks go to the two lawyers..."

During the trial, Zhang, who was detained on Nov. 16 for "gathering a crowd to disrupt public order" and fraud, told Liu and Zhao that they had done their duty, but can do no more as the court is unjust. Zhang also stated that it would seem apathetic towards Li Cairen, another detained Christian who authorities claim is the victim of Zhang's fraud charge, as she is still being held in an unknown place, Liu said (<http://www.chinaaid.org/2014/04/henan-tspm-pastor-tried-rights.html>).

Zhang, Zhao and Liu felt that the court was being unreasonable in regards to Li Cairen and the other three witnesses. Both lawyers claimed that the written testimonies shouldn't be accepted into the record without the witnesses present to confirm the authenticity of the records, as they suspected that the testimonies might have been fraudulent or obtained through torture. Zhao and Liu demanded that the "show trial" be stopped and that Li Cairen's rescue be made a priority.

Town locked down

Beginning on the afternoon of April 9, officers were sent to guard all the major roads and intersection into Nanle County, where they checked the IDs over everyone entering the county. Many of those who were stopped on the road were forced to leave Nanle County.

Officers also took the vehicle of Zhang's oldest daughter, Zhang Huixin "Yunyun." At 10 p.m. on April 9, Yunyun, her one-year-old daughter and her mother, Zhang's wife, were taken to the Nanle County Public Security Bureau for "interrogation," and weren't released until 1:30 a.m., Yunyun told China Aid.

The following morning, when the court session began, the entire city was on lockdown. According to one believer, there were guards stationed every few steps. Also, radio signals around the court were shielded and a large number of plainclothes police were patrolling the courthouse.

When Wang Yi, born Chen Jianping, and her fiancé, Hua Chunhui, both rights activists, attempted to go to the court, they were held by police officers and later taken from Nanle County by Domestic Security Protection Squad agents to Wang's hometown of Changyuan, Henan.

Police also held about a dozen other citizens who attempted to gather at the courthouse.

Meanwhile, the court session opened in a disproportionately small courtroom, where only two of Zhang's family members, his wife and youngest daughter Zhang Linxin "Shanshan," were allowed to be present. A government employee took every other seat.

Confined to the courtroom

At 5 p.m., having reached no conclusion, the judge adjourned the trial and announced that it would resume on a date to be determined. Police then locked the iron gate that leads to the hallway, trapping the lawyers in the courtroom.

Zhao and Liu were first told that the defendant was being escorted into a police car, and it was "inconvenient" for them to leave court. Then, a large number of police officers came to the courtroom to conduct a security check on the lawyers, which they rejected. Finally, the chief judge, Guo, said that the lawyers could leave after signing their written records. The lawyers said they would sign, but that the court must not take such unnecessary measures against them.

During the more than two-hour time period that the lawyers were held in the courtroom, they live-tweeted the events via their Weibo accounts, a Twitter-like social media platform. Netizens from across China who saw the lawyers' messages called the court and governing bodies in their own towns, denouncing the illegal behavior of the court.

It was only after the Shandong Provincial Department of Justice and the Tai'an Municipal Bureau of Justice in Shandong intervened that the judge allowed the lawyers to sign the paperwork and leave. With help from the two Shandong government agencies, President Sun, of the Puyang Municipal Lawyers Association, was able to come to the courthouse and pick up Zhao and Liu.

Questionable proceedings

Tensions in the courtroom ran high and no progress was made as the lawyers objected to all evidence submitted by the prosecution that had come from witnesses—none of whom were present at the trial. Zhao, Liu and questioned the judge repeatedly, but were denied each time.

A written testimony from Li Cairen, the key witness and supposed victim of Zhang's fraud charge, was submitted during the trial, but the lawyers questioned the validity of the record without having Li there to corroborate the facts in the record (see http://www.chinaaid.org/2013/12/update-nanle-county-christian-church_23.html and <http://www.chinaaid.org/2014/01/exclusive-identity-of-12-detained-nanle.html>).

"While offering the evidence, the prosecutor called it the 'witnesses' testimonies.' We pointed out his error that, actually, they are not witnesses' testimonies. Rather, they are a replacement and are written records. They are something produced by the police that is seemingly right but actually wrong as there are a lot of problems with them," Liu said.

"None of the four witnesses appeared in court. We questioned the prosecutor and asked him for the reasons the witnesses failed to appear in court," Liu added.

Liu and Zhao suspect that the written testimonies were coerced or tortured out of the witnesses or are fraudulent all together. "The investigators are police officers, and two investigators should sign on the last page of the written records from their investigation to confirm the truth and legality of the investigation," Zhao said.

"Indeed, there are names of two police officers. However, from the handwriting, it is obvious that one police officer signed the two names, which is a violation of the requirement in the Criminal Procedural Law," Zhao said. "We raised our objections, and the prosecutor couldn't give an explanation."

The lawyers felt that, including the written testimonies, there was no evidence to suggest that Zhang was guilty of fraud. "We pointed out in the court again and again that the so-called fraud case involves the victim Li Cairen, who is now being illegally detained. She was illegally kidnapped... in December 2013, and her whereabouts are unknown even now," Liu said.

"Little did we anticipate that the procuratorate would present a written record from the interrogation of Li Cairen [which took place] on Jan. 2, 2014 [at] the Nanle County Procuratorate. We asked them again and again for the whereabouts of Li Cairen. How can the procuratorate get a written record from Li Cairen? Obviously, he know Li's whereabouts," Liu said.

Lawyer Xia Jun, who was one of the first lawyers to provide legal aid to the detained Nanle County Christian Church members, said he witnessed Li's abduction. "I saw with my own eyes Li Cairen being dragged away by [police] from Zhang Shaojie's home. In order to get evidence [against Zhang], the Nanle police dragged Li away on Dec. 21. Now they won't let Li come out to testify thus her testimony is invalid."

"When we found out that [the procuratorate] was suspected of violating the law and committing a crime—when a victim is still under illegal control, all people should have an obligation to solve this problem first," Liu said. "Therefore, we demanded that the court terminate the trial and rescue Li Cairen. However, the court still pushed forward by force." In addition, China Aid learned that Li's husband, Liu Yankun, was placed under house arrest on the day of the trial; his whereabouts are currently unknown.

On top of concern for Li, the lawyers felt that other aspects of the trial were unfair. "Originally, it was a case of joint offense, and they should be tried at the same time. However, it was split by force into many cases [after the cases were returned to the Nanle County Public Security Bureau for further investigation]. The result of this is there was no way we could conduct investigations on the other defendants [behalf]," Zhao said.

The lawyers simply want authorities to follow the law: "Respect the law, respect a citizen's most basic dignity and freedom, and release Li Cairen so that Zhang Shaojie's case will receive a just and fair trial. We believe Zhang Shaojie is innocent," Liu said.

Why Chinese Christians are camping out to save their church and cross from demolition

By Xu Yangjingjing

The Washington Post (04.04.2014) - Thousands of Chinese Christians have camped themselves in and around a church in the eastern part of China to prevent it from being demolished after several crosses have already been torn down under a provincial campaign to curb the spread of Christianity, local residents and religious leaders said Friday.

Concerned that Christianity was growing too fast and in an "unsustainable" manner, local officials in the province of Zhejiang began a campaign in February to demolish any church buildings that violated local regulations, according to a government Web site.

But the real targets, local Christians say, are the prominent crosses that many churches use to advertise their presence. Several Christian leaders allege that the provincial Communist Party secretary objected to seeing many large and bright crosses during a recent trip along a major highway, and ordered some to be removed.

Since then, at least six crosses have been taken down in cities including Hangzhou and Zhoushan, according to ChinaAid, a Texas-based Christian advocacy group. Now, another is under threat -- at Sanjiang church in the city of Wenzhou, a large, new building that can hold up to 2,000 people.

Some churches were told to take the crosses down and to instead hang smaller ones inside the buildings. At Sanjiang Church, officials also demanded the church remove several small spires on the rooftop: When church leaders refused, officials threatened to tear down the entire building, said Zheng Leguo, an evangelical church leader from Wenzhou.

Although the church is registered with the authorities, it does not belong to the "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" of Protestant churches that critics say is closely controlled by the Communist Party.

Local Christians say they pooled together more than 20 million yuan (\$3.2 million) to build the church, which was completed last year. The church complex occupies more than 100,000 square feet of land. Locals admit it only has approval for around 20,000 square feet but say that this type of skirting around regulations is relatively commonplace in Zhejiang province.

Authorities sent the church a notice on April 3 saying the church building was illegal and posed "serious safety risks." Local residents counter that the building had been cited by the local government as a model project when it was completed last year.

"From what they discussed during negotiations, the point isn't about the illegal construction, but about the cross," said a local Christian leader, who requested anonymity for fear of retaliation. He has been staying in the church since Thursday with around 3,000 other Christians, some of whom have come from neighboring churches to help guard the building.

"Some top officials believe that there are too many crosses, too many churches," he said, "and in every county, they asked for a few crosses to be destroyed, not all of them."

But a local government official, who was not authorized to speak by name to the media, said authorities were trying to resolve the impasse peacefully and had never threatened to demolish the structures by force. "We've asked them to leave out of concern for their own safety, but some local followers still slept inside the building," he said. "The government is still negotiating with the people to figure out how to handle this smoothly."

China's constitution recognizes freedom of religion, but the government limits religious practice to officially-approved places of worship.

"This certainly represents a further escalation against religious freedom in China," said Bob Fu, founder of ChinaAid.

A 2010 report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences put the numbers of Christians in China at over 23 million. But scholars believe the real number is considerably higher, as many belong to Protestant "house churches," which are considered illegal by the authorities and often face harassment or even arrest.

Religious activities are also heavily restricted in ethnic minority areas, among Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims, in the name of security, while practitioners of the Falun Gong spiritual movement have faced intimidation, harassment and arrest, Human Rights Watch says.

Update: Zhejiang churches face demolition of crosses topping church building

China Aid Association (18.03.2014) - China Aid has learned that plans to demolish crosses outside churches in coastal Zhejiang, as reported earlier this month, have been postponed.

Ms. Li, a member of a house church in Hangzhou, the provincial capital of Zhejiang, said the church was told that for the time being, no action was going to be taken against the church.

However, a pastor from the city told China Aid that the demolitions are just about to start back up and were delayed only for the duration of the National Political Consultative Conference and National People's Congress, which took place earlier this month.

"The information we have received is that the crosses will still be demolished," the pastor said. "The reason why they haven't demolished the crosses here is because of the 'Two Sessions.' After the 'Two Sessions' are over, they will still demolish them."

Believers told China Aid the demolition was an act of "rectification" for the crosses being "too conspicuous and splashy" according to Zhejiang's party secretary Xia Baolong, who inspected the area on Jan. 8 (<http://www.chinaaid.org/2014/03/three-self-churches-in-zhejiang-anhui.html>).

China: Henan pastor's trial date postponed indefinitely

CSW (25.02.2014) - Chinese Pastor Zhang Shaojie's trial date, which had been set for 21 February, has been 'indefinitely postponed', according to lawyers quoted by China Aid.

The pastor's trial date was previously moved from 28 January to 12 February, and then 21 February. Zhang's lawyer Liu Weiguo was notified of the most recent postponement by text message just three days before the scheduled date. No reason was given for the postponement. However, some church members believe the delay may be connected in some way to China's upcoming National Political Consultative Conference and the National People's Congress; others believe the court authorities are awaiting orders from their superiors.

Pastor Zhang Shaojie, 49, belongs to the Nanle County Christian Church under the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement. He was detained on 16 November, and has since been charged with "fraud" and "disturbing public order". On 15 November 2013, several other Nanle church members were detained after petitioning a higher authority about a land dispute involving the church. Other church members were detained in November and December in connection with the case. In total over 20 church members were detained. At the time of writing, nine remain in some form of detention.

On 13 February, the Henan provincial authorities announced the immediate closure of all extralegal centres, commonly known as a form of "black jail", used to hold petitioners intercepted in Beijing. Shortly after, China Aid reported that a black jail in Henan where three of the detained church members had been held had been closed on 16 February. At the time of the transfer, the detainees' relatives had no information and were worried about their safety. One detainee, Zhao Guoli, has since been able to meet with his lawyer for the first time since his detention on 15 November.

The lawyers representing the detainees have issued an urgent statement detailing the obstacles faced by lawyers working on this case, which have made it almost impossible to perform their duties as legal representatives of the detained. On 12 December 2013, the lawyers submitted an official complaint and investigation request to the Puyang Municipal People's Procuratorate, accusing two officials of illegally depriving citizens of their freedom of religion and of abuse of power.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "The repeated postponement of Pastor Zhang's trial, without consulting the lawyers or providing an explanation for the delay, is of great inconvenience to his lawyers and family members. In addition, the sudden transfer of three detainees, without notifying their families, serves to underscore the lack of transparency and accountability which has characterised this case to date. We urge the authorities to respond urgently to the lawyers' request for an investigation into the possible abuse of power by officials handling this case."

China: twelve Christians still in detention three weeks after house church raid

CSW (14.02.2014) - Protestant Pastor Xu Yonghai and 11 members of his church remain in detention three weeks after the Holy Love Fellowship house church was raided on 24 January 2013.

According to reports from organisations including chinachange.org, 18 or 19 Christians had gathered to study the Bible together in a member's house in Tongzhou, Beijing on 24 January, when police arrived and detained 15 members of the group at the local police station. Four, including Pastor Xu Yonghai, were later released. However, Xu was detained again on 26 January.

He and eleven other church members are being held in Beijing Municipal First Detention Centre. According to a police announcement on 26 January, they are being criminally detained for their alleged participation in demonstrations and illegal assembly.

Several days before this incident, an official from the District Civil Affairs Bureau came to another Bible study session and accused the group of being an illegal gathering because they had not formally registered, in accordance with Article 12 of the Regulations on Religious Affairs, which stipulates that collective religious activities be held at registered sites and presided over by religious personnel or other qualified persons.

Some reports suggest that around the time of the incident, church members were attempting to visit another Christian already in detention.

It has also been suggested that there may be a connection between the crackdown and Pastor Xu's own situation. Xu has been under surveillance for several years in connection with pro-democracy activities and supporting unregistered Christian groups. He was previously sentenced to two years of re-education through labour after signing a statement calling for democracy and rule of law on the 6th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre; in 2003 he was imprisoned for two years for aiding a house church in Anshan.

Lawyer Liang Xiaojun and other human rights lawyers are planning to represent the detained Holy Love Fellowship members.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The detention of the 12 Holy Love Fellowship church members, without formal documentation at the time of the arrest, shows how vulnerable unregistered churches are to arbitrary interference with their peaceful activities. We call on the authorities to release the 12 detainees and urge the Chinese government to respect the right to freedom of religion or belief for all religious groups, both registered and unregistered."

Sichuan house church employees denied acknowledgment of innocence by local authorities

China Aid (21.01.2014) - The request for administrative reconsideration by a house church employee concerning his December detainment in the southwestern province of Sichuan was denied on multiple occasions in December and January.

Li Mingbo, an employee at the Langzhong house church, was given 15 days of administrative detention on Dec. 24 for organizing a Christmas gathering for church members.

Li was responsible for organizing one of two celebrations on Christmas Eve, of which he had already informed the Domestic Security Protection Squad. The Domestic Security Protection Squad had told Li that prior approval was required when they attempted to shut down Christmas celebrations in 2012.

"I told them on Dec. 23 that we would celebrate Christmas. [The Domestic Security Protection Squad officer] said no," Li said. "I said we celebrate Christmas once a year, and the brothers and sisters had already been notified about this, and everything had been decided. He said no, but we began the celebration anyway on Dec. 24."

"When [the Domestic Security Protection Squad] came, we were eating a meal. They took me into their custody and wanted me to pay a fine of 500 yuan (US\$82). I said I would not pay the fine, and I said that was my religious belief, and that my belief is pure, is not a cult," Li said. It was because Li refused to pay the fine that he was detained.

When Li was released on Jan. 8, he submitted an official request for administrative reconsideration, demanding that the Domestic Security Protection Squad admit he was innocent. Li said that an officer at the Domestic Security Protection Squad wanted him to sign a document, admitting his guilt before his request could be considered, but Li refused.

"I didn't sign [the document on Dec. 25, the first time it was presented] as I...don't admit

to being guilty, and I have objections to their penalty. After I was released, I went to the Domestic Security Protection Squad to look for [the officer]. I asking him to give me the decision for the administrative reconsideration because the act was one of illegal law enforcement," Li said.

"He said I didn't want to sign it when he tried to give it to me [on Dec. 25]. I said the reason why I didn't sign it was because I was not satisfied with it. I asked him what was different from when he gave it to me on Dec. 25 and when he gave it to me on Jan. 8," Li said.

"On Jan. 10, I went there again to look for him, and again they refused to give me the document admitting my innocence, and they were extremely vicious."

Despite Li's disappointment at the rejection of his request, some good may have come from it after all. The church's pastor said that after Li's appeal the Domestic Security Protection Squad dared not issue a public notice of Li's administrative penalty.

The Langzhong house church, which has a congregation of more than 1,000 believers, has been persecuted many times. In the past, the Public Security Bureau warned them that their gatherings were illegal and demanded that they stop the gatherings.

Henan authorities ready to put Christian pastor Zhang on trial

Asia News (16.01.2014) - Authorities in the central province of Henan have formalized charged of " fraud " and " disturbing public order" against the Protestant Christian pastor Zhang Shaojie, arrested in November 2013 after a fierce battle to defend his congregation's property against government expropriation. His lawyers , Liu Weiguo and Xia Jun, confirm that the trial will take place " soon ."

Zhang is part of the Three-Self Movement, the "official" Protestant Church built by Mao Zedong in the early years of his government. In China only registered religious groups are allowed. But there are more unofficial Protestant Christians (about 80 million) than members of the Three-Self Movement (about 20 million). Fearing that the situation may get out of hand, for almost five years there has been a campaign to eliminate the underground communities or merge them into the official community.

Pastor Zhang leads the community in the county of Nanle. Beyond the formal charges the reason for his arrest is not clear: on the one hand there is his refusal to surrender Church property to the authorities, on the other hand some sources speak of a "maneuver" to replace him as leader of the official Christian community in the area. In any case, the cleric has denied having done anything wrong .

At Christmas, hundreds of Protestant Christians from Shenzhen, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Hebei, Shandong and Beijing went to Nanle to express their support for the local community and spend the holidays there. They were forced to celebrate Christmas service outside, since the church premises are guarded by security officials. Immediately after the service, they were attacked by "unknown assailants" who beat them.

A faithful in the area, anonymous for security reason, says: "It seems clear that the government has already prepared some 'evidence' to prove that our pastor is guilty. But he is not. The authorities' behavior is really terrible, scandalous towards us all".
