

China Launches New Crackdown on Underground-Church Movement

Several prominent house-church leaders have been arrested since January in an intensified wave of religious persecution. Christians in China are expecting a spiritual revival to follow a new wave of persecution on the unregistered churches in the communist nation, says the head of a Pennsylvania-based organization dedicated to raising awareness about religious liberty abuses in China.

Bob Fu, head of China Aid Association based in Glenside, Pa., says believers in China are expecting a recent crackdown on the underground church to result in hundreds coming to Christ. "They feel another round of revival is coming," Fu told Charisma. "Whenever there is a major wave of persecution ... there is a major spiritual revival."

Since January several prominent house-church leaders have been arrested, including Deborah Xu Yongling, 58, the sister of Peter Xu Yongze, founder of the Born Again church movement, which has millions of followers. Police reportedly arrested her Jan. 24 in Henan province while she was sleeping at her niece's house, Asia Harvest reported. After significant international pressure, she was released on bail March 15, China Aid said.

Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) reported that also on Jan. 24, police arrested Qiao Chunling, 41, who is closely associated with Li Tian'en, one of China's most prominent house-church leaders. The following day Zeng Guangbo, 35, was arrested at a

house church in Zengzhuang village, located in Henan province, China Aid Association said. A former military policeman who was fired in 1988 because of his work with the underground church, Zeng escaped two days later, but police rearrested him March 1 when he tried to pass through the Inner-Mongolia border into Russia.

The arrests came after top leaders from the Religious Affairs Bureau and the United Front Work Department, which oversee religion in China, viewed a four-hour documentary titled *The Cross: Jesus in China* by California-based China Soul for Christ, and were briefed on a recent book, *Jesus in Beijing*, by journalist David Aikman. Both works document the unprecedented growth of the underground church in China.

Aikman, a former China correspondent for Time magazine, said none of the leaders arrested recently were named in his book. He said he carefully masked the identities of others. "I don't, frankly, think any of the older [house-church leaders] were picked up as a result of my book," Aikman told Charisma. "They are hardly news to the authorities."

"This is just one of a series of crackdowns. I hope it is short-lived. ... But if you pretend nothing is going on, you do tremendous disservice to the Chinese Christians, who have been [facing persecution] for years."

The video, written and directed by Christian pro-democracy leader Yuan Zhiming, clearly shows the faces of several house-church leaders who agreed to be interviewed before the camera. But China Soul for Christ President Wenji Xie said the documentary had nothing to do with the recent arrests.

"The situation [in China] is the same," he told Charisma, adding that there may have been an increase in arrests in certain areas. "This is part of their annual crackdown. They always do this right after the Chinese New Year."

Fu said a heightened repression of the house-church movement had been in motion for more than a year. But he believes it may have intensified after participants in the National Religious Working Conference saw the video and were briefed on the book.

"Maybe they used this as a pretext, an excuse, to do more," Fu said. "From the beginning of 2003 until now, almost every province has been affected by the campaign to stop the growth of the house-church movement."

Fu said the government may treat incarcerated Christians in much the same way they treated members of the Falun Gong cult, subjecting them to brainwashing, torture and political study camps, or forcing them to sign a paper renouncing their faith or join a state-sanctioned church.

Christian advocacy groups encourage believers in the West to write letters to the Chinese Embassy, the U.S. ambassador to China and congressional leaders. To that end, VOM recently launched a Web site, , dedicated to mobilizing Christians to write letters of encouragement to Christians imprisoned for their faith and to relevant officials.

At press time, journalist Li Ying was pictured on the site. She is currently serving a 15-year sentence for producing an underground-church magazine. By mid-March, VOM spokesman Todd Nettleton said more than 1,400 people had written her letters,

which were translated into Chinese at the site.

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