

China Plans to Eradicate House Churches

China's government is engaged in a three-phase campaign to eradicate Protestant house churches, according to a statement released on April 20 by the China Aid Association (CAA).

The government's strategy was clearly outlined in a document released last September during a training class for "Patriots in the Christian Community" run by the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), according to an unnamed CAA source.

From January through June of this year, the document called for local authorities to conduct a thorough investigation of house churches nationwide and create dossiers on each of them. In phase two, for the following two to three years, authorities would strongly encourage unregistered churches to affiliate with the government-approved Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM); and in phase three, to be completed within 10 years, churches refusing to comply would be shut down, according to the CAA.

Officials would also ban the words "house church" and all reports on house churches from websites and other media and replace the term with "house gatherings"—a term that would refer to groups meeting in sites affiliated with the TSPM.

In a recent random survey conducted by the CAA's source in several provinces, over 95 percent of **house church** leaders said they had already felt the impact of these investigations, while 85 percent said local religious affairs departments had already created a dossier for their group.

"Since the beginning of 2012, we have noticed an increase in the frequency of persecution," the CAA said in a press statement. "In addition to the continuing persecution of

Shouwang Church in Beijing, the number of similar cases has risen 20 percent over last year and has spread into other areas, including Christian education, publication and bookstores.”

‘Operation Deterrence’

The campaign first emerged in December 2010 through a secret document entitled “Operation Deterrence,” issued by the Communist Party’s Central Committee. This directive urged officials at all levels to “guide” **house church** Christians to attend only churches belonging to the government-approved TSPM and to break up large house churches into smaller groups.

Shouwang Church, numbering some 1,000 members, felt the effects of this directive almost immediately. Having blocked Shouwang’s attempts to register legally or to find a suitable worship venue, officials in April 2011 began to arrest and interrogate church members who sought to meet outdoors in a public plaza.

Police detained 12 church members who again gathered for outdoor worship last Sunday, a little over a year after the first outdoor service in April 2011, Shouwang announced yesterday on its Facebook page. Three members were quickly released, but the others were sent to local police stations and held for several hours of interrogation. Another church member was detained in a hotel on Friday afternoon and was not released until Sunday morning.

“In the past year ... our experience of the Lord differs every week. It is His grace and peace that have protected us and sustained us until now,” a church staff member wrote. “May the power and glory of the Lord become our strength while waiting for God in this difficult circumstance.”

“Operation Deterrence” also empowered SARA to certify and create files on all Protestant clergy as a means to further implement China’s Regulations on Religious Affairs—a process

that should be completed by the end of 2012, according to a statement in January by SARA Deputy Director Jiang Jianyong. Churches led by clergy who are not certified under this system will then be at greater risk of being shut down.

Simultaneously, the China Christian Council and the TSPM are rolling out joint “Training Sessions for Ministerial Certification” across China. These sessions include instruction on China’s Regulations on Religious Affairs and the need for patriotism, according to the CAA.

According to the document circulated last September, the government plans to use “humane law enforcement measures” to achieve the total eradication of house churches.

“Humane law enforcement, long-term implementation and ‘united front’ style registration—how will this ... impact house churches that are seeking a path to religious freedom?” CAA asks in its statement.