

Chinese Christians Blocked from Attending Lausanne Congress

As organizers prepared for the opening of the Third Lausanne International Congress on World Evangelization tomorrow in Cape Town, South Africa, Chinese police threatened or detained some 200 delegates who had hoped to attend.

After receiving an invitation to attend the event, house church groups in China formed a selection committee and raised significant funds to pay the expenses of their chosen delegates, a source told Compass. Many delegates, however, were “interviewed” by authorities after they applied to attend the Congress, the source said.

When house church member Abraham Liu Guan and four other delegates attempted to leave China via Beijing airport on Sunday, authorities refused to allow them through customs, reported the Chinese-language Ming Pao News. Officials detained one delegate and confiscated the passports of the other four until Oct. 25, the closing date of the conference.

China’s State Administration for Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Public Security had notified border control staff that the participation of Chinese Christians in the conference threatened state security and ordered them not to allow delegates to leave, Liu told National Public Radio (NPR).

Officials also prevented two house church Christians from Baotou City, Inner Mongolia, from leaving the country, and on Oct. 9 placed one of them in a 15-day detention, the China Aid Association (CAA) reported.

When Fan Yafeng, leader of the Chinese Christian Legal Defense Association and winner of the 2009 John Leland Religious

Liberty Award, discussed the harassment with NPR on Tuesday, officials assigned some 20 police officers to keep him under house arrest.

On Wednesday, approximately 1,000 police officers were stationed at Beijing International Airport to restrain an estimated 100 house church members who planned to leave for the Congress via Beijing, according to CAA.

CAA also said authorities over the past few months had contacted every delegate, from Han Christians in Beijing to Uyghur Christians in Xinjiang, for questioning, and threatened some family members.

Normal church operations were also affected. The Rev. Xing Jingfu from Changsha in Hunan province told NPR that authorities cited the Lausanne Congress when they recently ordered his church to close.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Ma Zhaoxu, in a statement issued to NPR, accused the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization of communicating secretly with members of illegal congregations and not issuing an official invitation to China's state-controlled church.

According to the Ming Pao report, the Lausanne committee said members of the Three-Self Protestant Movement had asked if they could attend. Delegates, however, were required to sign a document expressing their commitment to evangelism, which members of official churches could not do due to regulations such as an upper limit on the number of people in each church, state certification for preachers, and the confinement of preaching to designated churches in designated areas. House church Christians faced no such limitations.

The first such conference was held in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974, which produced the influential Lausanne Covenant. The second conference was held in 1989 in Manila. Some 4,000 delegates from 200 countries are expected to attend the third

conference in Cape Town.

Progress or Repression?

China watchers said there has been a slight easing of restrictions in recent months, accompanied by a call on Sept. 28 from senior Chinese political advisor Du Qinglin for the government to allow the independent development of the official church. Du made the remarks at the 60th anniversary celebrations of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, according to the government-allied Xinhua news agency.

The BBC in August produced a glowing series on the growth of Christianity in China after Chinese authorities gave it unprecedented access to state-sanctioned churches and religious institutions. Religious rights monitor Elizabeth Kendal, however, described this access as part of a propaganda campaign by the Chinese government to reduce criticism of religious freedom policies.

NPR also produced a five-part series on Chinese religions in July. The series attributed the growth of religious adherence to the “collapse of Communist ideology” and pointed out that growth continued despite the fact that evangelism was “still illegal in China today.”

The claims of progress were challenged by an open letter from Pastor Zhang Mingxuan, president of the Chinese Christian House Church Alliance, to Chinese President Hu Jintao on Oct. 1, China’s National Day.

In the letter, published by CAA on Oct. 5, Zhang claimed that Chinese house church Christians respected the law and were “model citizens,” and yet they had become “the target of a group of government bandits ... [who] often arrest and beat innocent Christians and wronged citizens.” Further, he added, “House church Christians have been ill-treated simply because they are petitioners to crimes of the government.”

Zhang then listed several recent incidents in which Christians

were arrested and sent to labor camps, detained and fined without cause, beaten, interrogated and otherwise abused. He also described the closure or demolition of house churches and the confiscation of personal and church property.

He closed with a mention of Uyghur Christian Alimjan Yimit, "who was sentenced to 15 years in prison because he evangelized among Uyghurs, "his very own people."