

Chinese Pastor Sentenced to 15 Years in Prison

✖ Chinese authorities have quietly sentenced Uyghur Christian Alimjan Yimit (Alimujiang Yimiti in Chinese) to 15 years in prison on the apparently contrived charge of “providing state secrets to overseas organizations,” according to China Aid Association (CAA).

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

(In this image released by China Aid Association, Alimujiang Yimiti is shown with his wife, Gulnuer, and one of the couple’s two sons.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

who beat him or why.

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

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

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

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

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