

Thousands of Christians Form Human Shield to Protect Church

Thousands of Christians have formed a human shield around a newly constructed church in Zhejiang province in China after authorities earlier this week threatened to demolish the building. The Sanjiang Christian Church reportedly cost more than \$4.8 million to construct and was built over a six-year period in Wenzhou, one of China's most Christianized cities.

Friday evening, the *Telegraph* reported that hundreds of Christians, including elderly and disabled church members, had stationed themselves inside the church to block access to demolition teams during the night.

"I slept here last night and I will do the same again tonight. We pulled two pews together so it was quite all right. We feel at peace and fearless when we are with our God," He Hongying, an 81-year-old church member, told the *Telegraph*. Many of the Christians forming the human shield have expressed their determination to remain at the church until authorities back down.

The standoff at the church reportedly began after a Communist Party secretary visited the area and insisted the church was too large.

"When the Party secretary Xia Baolong visited the local areas, he found the cross on top of the church very conspicuous. So he ordered that it be demolished. Then, the officials from Yongjia county demanded that the church tear down the cross and the top floor of the church," Zheng Leguo, a young leader at Sanjiang Church, told ChinaAid.

On Thursday evening, several hundred police officers with

bulldozers took up positions around the church.

"I held their hands and said, 'Comrades, don't take down our cross. I can give you my head instead,'" Yang Zhumei, 74, told the *Telegraph*.

"Even if they take my head, I can still find happiness with God," she shouted.

Sanjiang Christian Church is a part of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), China's government-backed Protestant Christian organization, making the conflict highly unusual. In November, nearly two dozen TSPM church members, including a church pastor, were arrested in Henan province in a crackdown over the church's community activism. Christians who attend illegal house church gatherings in China, believed to be as many as 80 million, are subject to far more frequent harassment and arrest.

Ryan Morgan, International Christian Concern's (ICC) regional manager for East Asia, says, "We call on the authorities in Zhejiang province to immediately rescind their orders for the demolition of Sanjiang Christian Church. This church was legally constructed and has every right to exist in a nation which strongly claims, at least in the international community, to respect the religious freedom of its citizens.

"No one of any faith should have to place their life between a bulldozer and their house of worship. ICC stands with the Christians of Zhejiang province as they take this courageous stand to protect their rights."

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