

Worshippers Thought They Were Being Robbed During Police Raid

Chinese police raided multiple house church gatherings last month in northwestern China in an apparent crackdown on “illegal” Christian gatherings, according to International Christian Concern (ICC).

The leaders of the Christian gatherings were detained for questioning, and two were sentenced to several days of public security detention. Christians in China are required by law to attend government-sanctioned religious services, while those under the age of 18 are prohibited from attending religious services of any kind.

According to ChinaAid, worshippers present at one of the raids on June 9 said unidentified intruders stormed the home where a worship service was being conducted and shouted, “Yours is an illegal assembly, and all of you must stay still!”

Worshippers initially thought they were being robbed, as the police were dressed in plain clothes and refused to show identification. Police proceeded to question members of the church, located in the Shayibake District of Urumqi, for an hour and threatened to take younger members away for further questioning. Eventually, Brother Tan Wen, believed to be the group’s leader, was detained, sentenced to 10 days of public security detention and fined 500 yuan, or about \$80.

In a separate police raid last month, 60-year-old Zhu Jinfeng, who led a small Bible study with neighbors in Urumqi for more than 10 years, was also detained and charged with conducting “illegal” Christian activities. Police fined Ms. Zhu 200 yuan, or about \$30, before releasing her.

Despite feeling “shaken” by the raid, Ms. Zhu reportedly attempted to file an application for “administrative reconsideration” of her case with authorities but was turned down upon her initial attempt. Speaking to the *South China Morning Post*, Ms. Zhu said she feels “lost and desperate” and has stopped worshipping in her own home.

The raids took place in Urumqi, capital of the highly volatile Xinjiang Province. Tensions in the region have been high between the indigenous Uighur population and ethnic Han Chinese settlers. The latter moved in at the behest of the Chinese government, which has sparked violent clashes between the groups over the past several years. China maintains a heavy security presence in the area to clamp down on any perceived dissent.

Xinjiang Province is also home to Alimujiang Yimiti, an Uighur house church leader and father of two. He was detained in 2007 for “spreading Christianity” and secretly sentenced in 2009 to 15 years of imprisonment. His case is widely believed to represent one of the most egregious sentences given to a Christian leader in China in recent years. Last week, ICC submitted a petition to Chinese Ambassador Cui Tiankai calling for Yimiti’s immediate release.

“This string of recently reported raids on Christian gatherings in Xinjiang Province is very disturbing. China publicly claims to value human rights, including the basic tenets of religious freedom, and has convinced many in the outside world that Christians are no longer the subject of government-sponsored persecution,” says Ryan Morgan, ICC’s regional manager for China.

“Although overall conditions may have improved over the last decade, these raids are clear evidence that Christians who choose to worship outside of state-controlled religious organizations remain subject at any time to arrest, deprivation of property and monetary fines at the very least.

For individuals like Alimujiang Yimiti, practicing one's faith has meant much worse. ICC calls on the Chinese government to immediately end police raids on Christian gatherings and release all those who remain detained for practicing their faith, including Alimujiang Yimiti," Morgan says.