

Protestant Church updates – July '10. -

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Christians held to extort cash, say wife, lawyer

Verna Yu

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A Christian sent to re-education through labour is scheduled to appear in a Henan court later this week, while police are threatening other members of his church that they too could face such detention if they fail to renounce their faith, his wife said yesterday.

Supporters say the case highlights local governments' arbitrary crackdowns on unregistered village churches to intimidate followers and to extort money from them.

Gao Jianli, a former leader of the church in Yucheng county, and three other church members were accused of belonging to "religious cults" and were given re-education through labour in March for one year after their families refused to pay for their release.

Police originally detained seven church members on March 9 and told their families to pay about 4,000 yuan (HK\$4,600) each to secure their release, Gao's wife, Li Yuxia, said. Three families paid.

"They are just using religious cults as an excuse to con people out of their money," Li said. "This is extortion."

Gao is set to appear in the Weidu District People's Court in Xuchang on Friday. The three other detained Christians are also awaiting their court hearings after lawyer Yang Huiwen filed a complaint to challenge the legality of their confinement. "In our opinion, they are just Christians," Yang said.

On Thursday, police harassed about a dozen elderly Christians who had made a statement testifying to the four Christians' good character, church members said.

"[The police] said the four had been 'reformed' and had abandoned their faith. They ordered the old people to stop going to church because they were a religious cult," said one church member.

Li said police had also intimidated the old people into putting their thumbprints on a statement they could not understand. Many of them are illiterate.

"They threatened them, saying they too would be sent to re-education through labour [if they didn't co-operate]," she said.

A member of the staff at the local Tianmiao town police station said he did not know about Thursday's incident.

Under the mainland's administrative detention system, people who have committed "minor offences" can be sent to labour camps for up to four years without trial.

Yang said he could not be sure his clients would be vindicated.

"It is difficult at this stage to judge what the outcome will be," he said.

Meanwhile, local Christians said the persecution had only strengthened their faith.

"They are barring us from worshipping, but we will continue," a church member said. "I will remain faithful to God."

Christian legal expert Dr Fan Yafeng said local police were trying to extort money from the Christians using religion as a pretext. There appeared to be more religious crackdown cases of this kind in Henan than other provinces, he said.

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Chinese Christian refuses to back down on critical book

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By Francis Wong

Hong Kong, 14 July (ENI)--A Chinese Christian intellectual, Yu Jie, is insisting he will not back down on plans to publish a book in Hong Kong critical of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, despite threats from Beijing police.

"I will not submit to the authorities," Yu told ENInews from Beijing on 10 July, urging Chinese authorities not to infringe on the freedom of expression of dissenters.

He said he had been summoned to a police station in the Chinese capital on 5 July where he was told not to publish his book and that it might harm national security. Yu said that police had said publishing the book might lead to criminal responsibility.

"Criticism against State leaders should be constitutional," said Yu, a member of an unofficial "house church" in Beijing.

He called on Wen to stop keeping dissenters under surveillance.

His book would be published in Hong Kong in the coming three months, Yu said. In the book, he says Wen is not genuinely interested in political reform, but pretends to show his concern, "just like an actor".

Yu noted that the Lausanne Covenant, a 1974 document drawn up in at a global Christian conference, acknowledges that Christians have the right to participate in political life. His remarks about the Chinese premier were not only an attempt to practise the freedom of expression but were also a means for Christians to pursue social justice, said Yu.

In an open letter released on his blog on 11 July, Yu praised human rights activist Joachim Gauck, a former East German dissident who stood as a candidate for the German presidency in June.

As a Lutheran pastor in the northern city of Rostock, Gauck helped to organize protests against East Germany's then communist rulers in 1989. He then worked as the first head of the authority that deals with the archives of the Stasi, the former East German security service, following the unification of Germany.

Yu said his dream was for the establishment of a similar archive in China.

In its 2010 report, the human rights advocacy group Amnesty International said Chinese authorities had "continued to tighten restrictions on freedom of expression". [373 words]

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