



*A bulldozed house church in Sha Ao Village, with broken cross, July 2003.
Photo: China Aid Association*

CHINA

ZHEJIANG CHURCH DEMOLITIONS IN SPRING 2014

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INTRODUCTION

The demolition of Sanjiang Church in Zhejiang Province, China, on 28 April 2014 has been widely reported in the international media. The reasons behind the demolition, and the number and diversity of other churches in similar situations, have only recently come to light. This briefing aims to outline the context in which these incidents are occurring, and the possible reasons behind them.

WENZHOU, 'CHINA'S JERUSALEM'

One of the reasons the demolition of Sanjiang Church has shocked observers both in Zhejiang and internationally is its size: the destruction of a cathedral-like 3,000-member church makes for an eye-catching photograph.



Photo: China Aid Association

Of equal or greater significance, however, is the church's location, Wenzhou, also known as 'China's Jerusalem'. Wenzhou's Christians are not only numerous,¹ they are also some of the wealthiest and most influential Christians in China. While in some parts of the country, particularly in less developed or politically contested regions, Christians continue to suffer harassment, intrusive monitoring

and detention at the hands of the local authorities, in Wenzhou Christians have been regarded as 'good citizens' who contribute to the city's entrepreneurial spirit. Christianity has flourished there, and officials have even turned a blind eye to the construction of large churches. This makes the demolition of churches in and around Wenzhou especially worrying.

SANJIANG CHURCH: NOT ALONE

In April 2014 police cordoned off the area around Sanjiang church and removed members from the site. Weeks earlier, the church leaders had entered into negotiations with the local authorities in an attempt to avoid the demolition of the church and the removal of its cross. Some sources say officials ignored the deal made at this time; others say the deal "broke down", although the reasons are unclear. On 28 April the demolition of the 3,000-member church began.

However, the table below shows that Sanjiang Church was not alone. From April to May 2014, at least 20 churches in Zhejiang Province have had all or parts of their structure removed or demolished, or have been threatened with demolition. Some sources estimate that hundreds of churches now face demolition. The churches listed below include both Protestant and Catholic, registered and unregistered. Some have moderate numbers, while others are mega-churches with hundreds or thousands of members. Some have had their sign removed, while others have been completely demolished. However, the one common theme is that they have almost all been ordered to remove religious symbols, most often the cross, but also sacred statues and signs.

¹ Some sources estimate there are 1 million Christians in Wenzhou. Bloomberg, 'Big Trouble in China's Little Jerusalem', 1 May 2014 <http://www.bloombergvew.com/articles/2014-05-01/big-trouble-in-china-s-little-jerusalem>



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THE WIDER CONTEXT IN CHINA

Research by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) in 2012 and 2013 found that while there had been a de facto improvement in the level of religious freedom enjoyed by Protestant churches in urban areas such as Beijing and Shanghai, this was not reflected in, or the result of, improvements in the law. At the same time, Christians in rural and remote areas, in particular the ethnic minority autonomous regions of Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, continued to experience violations of their freedom of religion or belief.

However, over the past few months churches in highly developed, urban areas where Christianity has flourished in recent decades are now fearful of a 'crackdown'. Three members of Shouwang Church in Beijing were placed under five-day administrative detention for 'disturbing public order' after attending an outdoor service on 4 May: this is the first time Shouwang members have been placed under administrative detention for attending an outdoor service since the church began to meet outside in April 2011. While Shouwang is a high-profile case, smaller churches which have until now been allowed to meet freely and without harassment have also reported increased monitoring of their activities, and in some cases new restrictions or warnings.

CONCLUSION: URBAN DEVELOPMENT OR RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION?

Some Zhejiang Christians, including many from Sanjiang Church, believe their churches are being targeted for demolition because a provincial secretary complained about the number of Christian crosses in the province. They claim that while local officials have been willing to turn a blind eye to, or even welcome, the growth of Christianity in Wenzhou and around, provincial authorities think the number and size of the churches has grown too quickly, and presents a threat. However, the authorities responsible for the demolitions maintain that they are simply complying with the Three Rectifications and One Demolition campaign targeting illegal structures. Some Christians outside Zhejiang also believe this is the main motive. However, at least one of the churches in the table below was an officially approved structure. In addition, it is noticeable that in the majority of cases, it is the cross, or another religious symbol, which has been hidden or removed. If the church building itself were unsafe or illegal, the entire structure, and not only the cross, would need to be demolished.

The demolitions in Zhejiang and the reaction of the Christians there highlight tensions between churches and the state, but also between local and provincial authorities, and between the approaches to different religions. Against the backdrop of Wenzhou, the University of International Relations and the Social Science Academic Press (China) co-released a report which named 'religious infiltration' as one of the four severe challenges to national security.² At the same time, President Xi Jinping has called on the Communist Party to be more tolerant of China's "traditional" faiths.³ The distinction between traditional faiths and foreign religions makes Christians and Muslims in particular vulnerable to accusations of being tools of foreign infiltration.

Christian communities which have enjoyed a good, or at least quiet, relationship with local authorities may now see their trust eroded by the sharp intervention of higher officials. This can only lead to a decline in the social harmony Beijing consistently claims to pursue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Chinese authorities:

- Immediately cease the demolition of crosses on churches in Zhejiang: where a cross or another part of the structure is considered 'illegal', the authorities should present the church leaders with their complaint and endeavour to negotiate;
- Provide clear instructions about the process of applying for permission to build a religious structure;
- Establish a complaints mechanism for churches and other religious buildings which have had their request for permission to build or extend refused;
- Make consistent efforts to enter into dialogue with religious leaders on all matters relating to their activities, with a view to promoting mutual trust and positive relations;
- Ensure that the right to freedom of religion or belief is fully protected in law and in practice for people of all faiths and none in China.

2 UCANews, 'China says religions are a threat to national security', 7 May 2014 <http://www.ucanews.com/news/china-says-religion-is-a-threat-to-national-security/70883>

3 Reuters, 'Xi Jinping hopes traditional faiths can fill moral void in China', 29 September 2013 <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/09/29/us-china-politics-vacuum-idUSBRE98S0GS20130929>

ZHEJIANG CHURCH DEMOLITIONS AND RELATED INCIDENTS APRIL-MAY 2014

Name	Denomination	Location	Incident(s)	Date of incident	Source
Jianao Church	Unknown	Pingyang County, Wenzhou	Cross removed; six members injured	23-31 April 2014	China Aid
Baiquan Church	Protestant – registration status unknown	Zhoushan	Cross removed, building partly or wholly demolished	23-31 April 2014	China Aid
Deen Church	Unknown	Jiaojiang District, Taizhou	Cross removed	23-31 April 2014	China Aid
Shuiyang Church	Unknown	Linhai, Taizhou	Cross removed	23-31 April 2014	China Aid
Nursing home of Yangyang Catholic church	Catholic	Liu City, Yeqing, Wenzhou	Cross removed	23-31 April 2014	China Aid
Longgang Hill Park	Catholic	Wenzhou	Statues and religious images hidden, removed and destroyed	26 April 2014	UCANews
Sanjiang Church	Protestant registered with TSPM	Yongjia County, Wenzhou	Church demolished; 10 members detained, interrogated; e-communications monitored; unconfirmed reports of injuries	28 April 2014	Various, including: CSW contacts, AFP, BBC, Bloomberg, The Telegraph, China Aid
Xiaying Church	Protestant – registration status unknown	Ningbo, Yinzhou	Demolition notice received	Early May 2014	China Aid
Catholic church in Tengqiao	Catholic	Tengqiao, Lucheng District	Threat of demolition	Early May 2014	China Aid
Wuai Church	Protestant – registration status unknown	Cangnan County, Wenzhou	Church building forcibly demolished	3 May 2014	China Aid
Catholic church in Liushi	Catholic	Liushi, Yueqing County, Wenzhou	Church building forcibly demolished	3 May 2014	China Aid
Baixi Christian Church	Protestant – registration status unknown	Yueqing County, Wenzhou	Cross removed (officially approved structure)	6 May 2014	China Aid
Taoyun Catholic Church	Catholic	Wenzhou	Cross covered up	6 May 2014	China Aid
Qiaosi Sunday Church	Unclear	Hangzhou	Cross demolished	7 May 2014	China Aid
Cangnan County Catholic Church	Catholic	Cangnan County, Wenzhou	Cross demolished	7 May 2014	China Aid
Sabbath Day Church	Unclear	Zhejiang	Cross demolished	7 May 2014	China Aid
Church in Haining	Unclear	Haining, Jiaxing, Zhejiang	Cross demolished	7 May 2014	China Aid
Christian Zhuen Church	Protestant – registration status unknown	Yiwu, Jinhua, Zhejiang	Sign with cross removed	Unknown	China Aid
2 hospitals (name unknown)	Unknown	Jiaxing	Crosses removed	7 May 2014	China Aid