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CHINA CSW condemns crackdown on Beijing church forced to meet outdoors

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) condemns the detention of 169 members of Shouwang Church by police in Beijing on Sunday, as they attempted to worship outdoors after their landlord bowed to government pressure to prevent the congregation from meeting in his building.

Members of the 1000-strong unregistered Protestant church gathered in a public area to hold a service on Sunday morning. According to reports, up to 1000 police officers cordoned off the area and forced the Christians onto buses. Some were taken to police stations and others to a local primary school where, according to reports, they sang hymns in detention. Their personal details were taken down and many were asked to sign declarations promising they would never attend Shouwang Church again. Many refused to do so and were not released until after midnight. The Pastor and two others currently remain in detention.

According to China Aid, Beijing authorities put over 20 of Shouwang's leaders under house arrest on Saturday evening, to ensure they did not attend Sunday's meeting. In an article about the church, The Global Times, an English-language official Chinese news agency, labelled the meeting "illegal" and said that Western interest in the incident was "abnormal".

In November 2009, Shouwang Church were forced to meet in a park in the snow after the landlord of the office building they were renting bowed to pressure from authorities to terminate the lease. The same year, the church raised funds and bought a 1500-meter-square office building in northwest Beijing for use by the congregation at a cost of 27 million yuan. However, the building's management company has also come under pressure by the authorities, and as a result the church has not received the keys to the building, despite paying for it in full. The church's congregation, which includes academics and human rights lawyers, has been under pressure from Beijing authorities for the past few years.

The Chinese government, nervous that Middle East-style protests could spread to China, are increasingly wary of unauthorized public gatherings. Sunday's incident comes in the context of the most significant crackdown on dissidents in recent years. Many political dissidents are in detention or are missing. Dr Fan Yafeng, Beijing house church leader and leader of the Christian Human Rights Lawyers' Association, is currently under house arrest. There has been no news regarding the whereabouts of Christian lawyer Gao Zhisheng who, apart from a brief reappearance in March 2010, has been missing for over two years. In the latest show of force, internationally renowned Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei has been detained under investigation for "economic crimes".

Unregistered religious groups in China operate in a legal grey area. The law only protects "normal" religious activities, and those who choose to practice their religion outside the officially sanctioned state bodies are vulnerable to accusations of illegal activity.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "China's rise in economic power must be matched by a commitment to abide by international and domestic law in the treatment of its citizens. We call upon the Chinese government to release the three members of Shouwang Church who remain in detention immediately. The Chinese government needs to show its commitment to religious freedom and human rights by allowing the

congregation to access the building they have purchased and releasing Dr Fan Yafeng, Gao Zhisheng and Ai Weiwei, whose cases are representative of many others of continuing repression.”