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CHINA | Concerns Over Crackdown on Christian Gatherings in Xinjiang

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is concerned about a crackdown on unregistered Christian meetings in Xinjiang, northwest China, in the last five months, amidst high levels of tension and outbreaks of violence in the region.

According to reports from China Aid Association, a number of unregistered Christian groups have been closed down, fined or had their members detained by police in Xinjiang in the last five months.

In March, one such group in Yili was shut down by local police and the religious affairs bureau, and a residence used for church meetings in Kurla was searched by police equipped with guns and electric batons. A woman was later detained. In June, two meetings in Urumqi were disrupted by local police and security officials, and two people were detained for short periods. One of the leaders was detained a second time in August when another meeting was disrupted by officials. He has since filed an application for administrative reconsideration. A Bible study leader detained in June after being charged with conducting “illegal” Christian activity is also filing for administrative reconsideration.

In the majority of cases described above, police and officials failed to show any identification or warrant, and some individuals present were unsure about why they were being questioned. In addition, the activities concerned were mostly very small meetings of less than 20 people in the private homes of the members.

Although the Chinese constitution grants protection for all “normal” religious activities, religious meetings outside the state-sanctioned associations allocated to recognized religions are technically illegal. Protestant churches in some major cities generally enjoy increasingly more freedom despite a lack of legal recognition. In areas like Xinjiang where citizens typically face more restrictions on their civil and political rights, even registered religious activities by Muslims, Catholics and Protestants are closely monitored and often restricted.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are very concerned about restrictions on peaceful meetings of Christians and other religious minorities in Xinjiang. By prohibiting even small-scale, private religious activities, the government is severely restricting individuals' right to freedom of religion or belief. Furthermore, the fact that, in many cases, police and security officers do not show any identification or warrant reflects the general weakness in rule of law in the region. We urge the Chinese government and Xinjiang local government to protect the right of all religious minorities to freedom of religion or belief, and to allow those who believe they have been wrongfully detained to file for administrative reconsideration."