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CHINA | Christians Remain Detained Three Weeks After Raid

Protestant Pastor Xu Yonghai and 11 members of his church remain in detention three weeks after the Holy Love Fellowship house church was raided on Jan. 24.

According to reports from organizations, including chinachange.org, 18 or 19 Christians had gathered to study the Bible together in a member's house in Tongzhou, Beijing on Jan. 24, when police arrived and detained 15 members of the group at the local police station. Four, including Pastor Xu Yonghai, were later released. Xu was detained again on Jan. 26.

He and 11 other church members are being held in Beijing Municipal First Detention Centre. According to a police announcement on Jan. 26, they are being criminally detained for their alleged participation in demonstrations and illegal assembly.

Several days before this incident, an official from the District Civil Affairs Bureau came to another Bible study session and accused the group of being an illegal gathering because they had not formally registered, in accordance with Article 12 of the Regulations on Religious Affairs, which stipulates that collective religious activities be held at registered sites and presided over by religious personnel or other qualified persons.

Some reports suggest that around the time of the incident, church members were attempting to visit another Christian already in detention.

It has also been suggested there may be a connection between the crackdown and Pastor Xu's own situation. Xu has been under surveillance for several years in connection with pro-democracy activities and supporting unregistered Christian groups. He was previously sentenced to two years of re-education through labor after signing a statement calling for democracy and rule of law on the 6th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. He was imprisoned in 2003 for two years for aiding a house church in Anshan.

Lawyer Liang Xiaojun and other human rights lawyers are planning to represent the detained Holy Love Fellowship members.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The detention of the 12 Holy Love Fellowship church members, without formal documentation at the time of the arrest, shows how vulnerable unregistered churches are to arbitrary interference with their peaceful activities. We call on the authorities to release the 12 detainees and urge the Chinese government to respect the right to freedom of religion or belief for all religious groups, both registered and unregistered."