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CHINA | Briefing Explores Tensions Behind Zhejiang Church Demolitions

A [new briefing](#) by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) analyzes the context and possible reasons behind the demolition of churches and removal of religious symbols in Zhejiang, China and recommends consistent dialogue between the authorities and religious leaders.

The briefing highlights “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.”

Wenzhou, known as “China’s Jerusalem”, has a large Christian population and numerous churches. From April to May 2014, at least 20 churches in Wenzhou and elsewhere in Zhejiang Province had all or parts of their structure removed or demolished, or have been threatened with demolition. The churches affected include both Protestant and Catholic, registered and unregistered. Some have moderate numbers, while others are mega-churches with hundreds or thousands of members.

Most recently, China Aid reported the demolition of two churches in Longwan, Wenzhou on May 8 and 9. Longwan is home to several churches established by missionaries over 100 years ago. One of the demolished churches, Shangwan Church, was built in 1868.

The most well-known demolition occurred on April 28 at 3,000-member Sanjiang Church. Weeks earlier, the church leaders entered into negotiations with the local authorities in an attempt to avoid the demolition of the church and the removal of its cross. It is unclear whether officials ignored an agreement made at this time or whether the deal “broke down”.

Some Zhejiang Christians believe the removal of crosses and the demolition of some churches was triggered by a visiting provincial secretary’s complaint about the number of Christian crosses in the province. The authorities responsible for the demolitions maintain they are simply complying with the Three Rectifications and One Demolition campaign targeting illegal structures. It is noticeable, however, that in the majority of cases, it is specifically the cross, or another religious symbol, which has been hidden or removed.

Freedom of Religion or Belief in China is a complex issue. According to the briefing, “while there has been a de facto improvement in the level of religious freedom enjoyed by Protestant churches in urban areas such as Beijing and Shanghai, this has been not reflected in, or the result of, improvements in the law.” Nor is this the case in rural, remote or conflict-prone areas, where Christians continue to experience violations of their freedom of religion or belief.

CSW's Chief Operating Officer Andy Dipper said, "This timely briefing explores the context in which these worrying incidents take place and contains a number of important recommendations. We urge the Chinese authorities to 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; to provide clear instructions about the process of applying for permission to build a religious structure; and to establish a complaints mechanism for religious buildings which have been refused permission to build."