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CHINA | More Crosses Removed from Zhejiang Churches

A year since the demolition of Sanjiang Church in China's Zhejiang Province as part of a campaign by the provincial government, crosses are still being removed from churches in the province. Eight Christians were found guilty of charges related to organizing meetings for Sanjiang church members.

The 3,000-member Sanjiang Church was demolished April 28, 2014. It was one of many Zhejiang churches wholly or partially demolished or threatened with demolition. This was apparently in connection the "Three Rectifications and One Demolition" campaign against "illegal structures" launched by the provincial government in 2013, which resulted in at least 400 incidents involving churches or church buildings.

Although the campaign appears to have slowed down this year, crosses from three churches were removed in April 2015. The after-effects of last year's rapid spate of demolitions and cross removals are also still being felt. On March 25, eight Christians accused of obstructing the government and organizing "illegal assemblies" for members of Sanjiang Church were found guilty on charges of "illegal occupation of farmland" and "gathering a crowd to disturb public order." They received sentences ranging from several months to three years, with reprieves of up to four years.

Many Christians in Zhejiang province believe churches have been deliberately targeted for demolition. A timeline of incidents related to the provincial government campaign, collated by CSW, shows over 400 cases of whole or partial demolition of a church or church-run building, forced removal, demolition, modification or covering of a cross, notice of demolition or cross removal, and related injury, and detention, arrest or summons. The actual number of incidents is likely higher.

In March 2015, Bishop Paul Meng Qinglu, a vice-chair of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, told UCANews that the central government had ordered an end to the campaign. However, China Aid Association reports that the authorities removed crosses from Hangzhou Bay Christian Church, Enquan Christian Church, and Qingyian Youzhu Church in early April.

In March, Pastor Huang Yizi of Fengwo Church was convicted of "gathering a crowd to disturb public order" and sentenced to one year in prison. Pastor Huang was taken into custody in August 2014 for protesting against the authorities' use of violence against Christians opposing church demolitions. Pastor Huang also blogged about the demolitions, which he described as "severe persecution."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are deeply dismayed to receive reports of

three more cross removals in Zhejiang Province, as well as the sentencing of those who protested against the forced cross removals and church demolitions in 2014. The authorities' actions against churches in Zhejiang Province over the past 16 months have resulted in widespread alarm amongst Protestants and Catholics in the province and elsewhere in China, many of whom attend state-sanctioned churches which peacefully carry out their religious activities in accordance with the law. The campaign in Zhejiang has caused deep distrust between the churches and the authorities. We strongly urge the central and provincial government to call an end to this campaign immediately, and to address the grievances of churches which have had their crosses or buildings destroyed or modified against their will. We further urge the government to guarantee the right to freedom of religion or belief for people of all faiths in China, including both registered and unregistered religious groups.”