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CHINA | Second Church Leader Detained

Li Guanzhong, a registered church pastor and China Christian Council (CCC) official, was placed under criminal detention Jan. 29 along with his wife, Zhang Shuzhen.

His detention comes two days after that of Pastor Gu Yuese, a CCC chair and fellow pastor with the official Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). Both Li and Gu opposed forced cross removals from churches in Zhejiang Province.

Li Guanzhong is the pastor of legally registered Puyang Christian Church and is also chair of the Pujiang branch of the CCC, a state-sanctioned religious organization which, along with the TSPM, oversees the practices and organization of registered churches in China. Li and his wife are being held on charges of accepting bribes and embezzlement, according to China Aid Association.

Pastor Gu Yuese, who was detained Jan. 27 and accused of misuse of funds, was formally arrested Feb. 6. In a statement allegedly written by Gu and released by his lawyers, Gu said he is cooperating with the authorities' investigation and urged members of his church not to "rally around" his case but to pray, obey the Bible, and support his successor, Pastor Zhang Zhongcheng, who was appointed by the authorities to lead the church after Gu was removed.

Pastors Gu and Li were publicly opposed to the authorities' removal of hundreds of crosses from Zhejiang churches since early 2014. Some church buildings were completely demolished as part of the campaign, which has affected both Protestant and Catholic, and both registered and independent churches. Li also refused to implement the government's order that all state-sanctioned churches fly the Chinese flag.

On Feb. 5, China Aid Association reported the release of Pastor Huang Yizi, who was also detained in connection with his opposition to the cross removal campaign. Huang is a pastor of Fengwo Church in Pingyang County and previously served one year in prison after he openly protested against the cross removals and church demolitions. His lawyer, Zhang Kai, who is

currently detained incommunicado, alleged that the trial violated standard procedures. Huang was released from prison Aug. 1, but 42 days later, on Sept. 12, he was detained again and accused of “endangering national security.”

Approximately eight other individuals are believed to be in some form of detention in connection with the cross removals in Zhejiang, including lawyer Zhang Kai, who has been detained since Aug. 25. During this period, his lawyers have been denied access to their client. On Jan. 28, the authorities informed Zhang’s family that he had written a note dismissing his lawyer.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, “While we welcome the release of Pastor Huang Yizi, we call on the Chinese authorities to investigate why Pastor Huang and several other Zhejiang pastors and Christians, have been detained and even formally arrested for peacefully expressing their opposition to the removal of crosses from churches in Zhejiang Province. We are particularly concerned that several individuals currently detained in China have written statements dismissing their legal representatives or asking others not to become involved in their cases. The Chinese authorities must urgently investigate the possibility that these statements were written under duress and must respect the right of all detainees to legal representation, in accordance with international law.”