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CHINA | Catholic Priests Missing; Woman Buried Alive

Father Yang Jianwei went missing in Hebei Province, China on April 15, the third Catholic priest to have disappeared and suspected to be detained by the authorities this month. Meanwhile, in neighboring Henan Province, a pastor's wife was reportedly buried alive April 14 while protesting the demolition of her church.

Father Yang is the parish priest for Anzhuang village in Baoding and belongs to a Catholic community not recognized by the Chinese government, sometimes known as the "underground" church.

According to the Union of Catholic Asian News, Baoding is home to almost 1 million Catholics, and Father Yang is one of at least five "underground" Catholic priests in Hebei believed to have been picked up by authorities this month. Two priests have been released. AsiaNews also reported the detention or disappearance of priests in Hebei and Fujian.

Although the reasons for these disappearances are not clear, they come at a time when activists, academics and lawyers are reporting deterioration in China's human rights situation and tightening restrictions on civil society, including religious communities. Both Catholics and Protestants in China have opposed the removal of hundreds of crosses by the authorities in Zhejiang Province since early 2014, while the international community has expressed alarm at the detention and disappearance of lawyers who have defended human rights including the right to freedom of religion or belief.

In other news, Ding Cuimei, a pastor's wife, was reportedly buried alive April 14 while protesting the demolition of her church in Henan Province.

According to reports from China Aid Association, Ding Cuimei and her husband, Pastor Li Jiangong, stepped in front of a bulldozer as a local developer, supported by the government, attempted to demolish their church building in Zhumadian, Henan Province. Ding Cuimei died of suffocation while her husband Li was able to dig his way out. Local police are reportedly

conducting an investigation.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "We are shocked and concerned by these reports concerning the death of Ding Cuimei in Henan Province in connection with the demolition of her church, and the disappearance of Catholic clergy in Hebei and Fujian. The enforced disappearance of any citizen, including religious leaders, human rights lawyers, and petitioners, is incompatible with rule of law. We urge the authorities in Henan, Hebei and Fujian to investigate immediately and impartially these worrying reports, and to hold to account those responsible. We further call on the Chinese government to remove restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief for both registered and unregistered communities in China."