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## **CHINA | Church Pastor Sentenced**

Almost two weeks after his trial on Dec. 26, Pastor Yang Hua of Living Stone Church, Guizhou, was sentenced to two and a half years in prison.

On the day of his trial, police blocked the road in front of the court and members of the public were barred from entering, according to China Aid. Yang's wife, Wang Hongwu, was also "forcibly escorted" back to her apartment, and police patrolled outside her home the rest of the day. She said Yang plans to appeal the sentence.

Pastor Yang Hua, also known as Li Guozhi, was formally arrested Jan. 22, 2016 on suspicion of "divulging state secrets." Charges relating to "state secrets" are often levelled at activists and dissidents and can entail certain restrictions, such as family members not being allowed to attend the trial. Yang was placed in administrative detention in December 2015 for "obstructing justice" and "gathering a crowd to disturb social order" before being put into criminal detention for "illegally holding state secrets." Church members see this as part of an attempt by the authorities to pressure the church into registering with the state-sanctioned religious association, the Three Self Patriotic Movement, or face closure.

In September 2016, Yang Hua's lawyers revealed he had suffered from serious health conditions as a result of his ill-treatment in detention.

Living Stone Church, an unregistered Protestant church with over 700 members, has experienced increasingly repressive measures by the authorities. A "Rectification Order" received by the church on Nov. 18, 2015 from the Nanming District City Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau stated the church's use of a commercial building was illegal and gave the church three days to respond or incur fines. An application by the church for a reconsideration of the penalty notice was rejected by Guiyang Municipal People's Government, and several church members were detained or fined in connection with the case.

These developments take place against the backdrop of increasing restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief in China. According to RFA, Chinese authorities have prevented thousands of Tibetans from attending an important Buddhist ceremony in India led by the Dalai Lama which will take place Jan. 11-13. According to the report, authorities confiscated passports from potential participants and ordered those already in India and Nepal to return to China. Also this week, China Aid reports that a Christian woman in Xinjiang was sentenced to three years in prison after holding a Bible study in her home.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "This sentence follows years of harassment of Pastor Yang Hua and other members of Living Stone Church. CSW believes the church has been targeted by the authorities because it refuses to register under the state-sanctioned Three Self Patriotic Movement. Some members have also provided advice and support to other churches facing pressure from the authorities. We call on the Chinese authorities to release Pastor Yang Hua, and to respect all Chinese citizens' right to freedom of religion or belief."