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CHINA | Concerns Raised About Vatican Agreement

The Vatican's recent decision to sign a provisional agreement on the appointment of bishops with China, which comes amid a crackdown on religious communities across the country, including the detention of Catholic clergy and restrictions on their religious practice concerns CSW.

The agreement was signed Sept. 22. Details of the deal remain unknown, but it is believed that under the agreement the Chinese authorities will submit a candidate for bishop to the Vatican, with the Pope having final veto power.

While some welcome the agreement, which they believe brings an end to a 70-year impasse between China and the Vatican, many Catholics remain divided on the issue, arguing that the appointment of bishops must remain a papal decision. Critics believe that in signing this agreement, it creates the perception that the Vatican may appear to have indirectly legitimized China's oppressive record against religious groups, including Catholics.

CSW's East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers said, "CSW is deeply concerned about the timing of this provisional agreement between the Chinese government and the Vatican. While we understand some of the motivations behind the Vatican's effort towards an agreement, there are significant concerns about the implications for freedom of religion or belief in China. If any such agreement is to be of real value, it must put freedom of religion or belief at the center. We reiterate our call on the Chinese authorities to release all Catholics in China held in any form of detention, and all others detained in connection with their peaceful religious activities."

The signing of the deal comes as the government in China intensifies a widespread crackdown on churches across the country, which has affected both registered and unregistered, Protestant and Catholic churches. Since the passage of the Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA) on Feb. 1, authorities have demolished at least 20 churches, removed or demolished 100 crosses and made hundreds of arrests in Henan province alone. This is not an exhaustive list and the true number of incidents are likely to be higher, both in Henan and across China.

This severe crackdown is part of a wider campaign of “Sinicization” by the government in China, replacing religious icons with Party slogans, flags and pictures of Xi Jinping. On the morning of July 17, Liangwang Catholic Church was demolished by authorities without any prior warning.

Religious freedom violations are not confined to Christianity. In Xinjiang, it is thought that up to a million people are detained in “re-education centers,” and there has been no improvement in the persecution of Tibetan Buddhists or Falun Gong practitioners.