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CHINA | Police Arrest 100 Church Members

Police arrested over 100 members of Early Rain Church in Chengdu, Sichuan Province on Dec. 9, including the church's pastor and other leaders.

In the early hours of Sunday, Dec. 9, the authorities launched a large-scale crackdown. Police searched church members' homes and arrested dozens of leaders and seminary students.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW condemns the arrests of Pastor Wang Yi and members of Early Rain Church. For years, Early Rain Church has been peacefully meeting for religious services as well as providing essential support to some of the most vulnerable people in society. On Human Rights Day, CSW calls on the authorities to release all members of Early Rain Church immediately and without condition, and to cease all harassment of independent churches. We further urge the international community to press China to release all those detained in connection with their religion or belief, and to revise or remove legislation not in line with international provisions on the right to freedom of religion or belief."

The arrests came just a day before International Human Rights Day, which marks the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 of the Declaration includes protection of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

In May 2018, authorities detained or removed over 200 members of Early Rain Church in order to prevent them from holding a prayer vigil for victims of the Wenchuan earthquake of 2008. Pastor Wang Yi was detained by police and accused of "picking quarrels and causing trouble" on May 11 and released the following night. Pastor Wang has criticized the government's policy towards unregistered or independent churches (sometimes known as "house churches") like Early Rain, and the revised regulations on religious affairs which came into effect this year.

The spate of arrests Dec. 9 came exactly three years after police in Guiyang city, Guizhou Province sealed off three locations of Living Stone Church placing the church's pastor under administrative detention. Like Early Rain, Living Stone is an unregistered church which has peacefully opposed forced closure. Pastor Yang Hua was released

from prison on June 19 after completing a two-and-a-half-year sentence. The church's other leader, Pastor Su Tianfu, was sentenced to one year in prison suspended for two years, with a further six months' residential surveillance, following his trial on April 26.

The crackdown on Early Rain Church comes amid increasing violations by the authorities against both registered and unregistered churches in China, including forced closure of churches, demolition of religious buildings, harassment and physical attacks against church members, and a ban on under-18s attending church services.