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CHINA | Places of Worship Shut Down, Worshippers Harassed Over Christmas

Members of Early Rain Church in Sichuan continued to be monitored, harassed and prevented from meeting following a spate of arrests beginning Dec. 9. Approximately 23 people are detained or disappeared, including Pastor Wang Yi and his wife Jiang Rong.

Bulletins posted on social media reported that the church's WeChat groups and over half the personal WeChat accounts of church members had been closed down or restricted from sending messages since the crackdown began, and other radio and social media accounts have also been shut down. Another bulletin reported that the authorities had forcibly taken four foster children, aged three to nine years old, away from one couple who are church members.

On Dec. 24, the church's sanctuary was confiscated and turned into a community police office space. Between approximately Dec. 20-31, authorities also closed churches and confiscated materials from unregistered church groups in Anhui, Inner Mongolia and elsewhere in Sichuan, and prevented or interrupted Christmas celebrations in many places across the country. School children were warned not to participate in Christmas events. Authorities in several cities in different parts of the country ordered restrictions on Christmas decorations in commercial areas as well, but decorations were permitted in others.

During the same period, officials shut down three mosques in Yunnan Province, claiming that the mosques had conducted "illegal religious education," according to the South China Morning Post. Social media clips showed police confronting Hui Muslim worshippers and attacking protesters.

Hui Muslims in China have generally experienced a greater degree of tolerance than Uyghur Muslims in the north western Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region where over one million individuals are believed to have been detained without charge in political re-education camps in the region since 2017. Recent estimates are as high as three million. Some have been detained in connection with peaceful religious activities, and witnesses report that inside the camps detainees are required to renounce Islam and promise not to follow religion. There are now fears that Hui Muslims are also facing increasing restrictions on their right to freedom of religion or belief.

In a statement issued Dec. 19, US Senator Marco Rubio and Rep. Chris Smith, chair and co-chair of the bipartisan Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC), expressed deep concern about the escalating crackdown against Christians in China against the “backdrop of the human rights crisis unfolding in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.”

In addition, on Dec. 26 human rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang was put on trial for “subversion of state power” after more than three years in incommunicado detention. His wife Li Wenzu was put under house arrest to prevent her from attending the trial. Activists, journalists and diplomats were also prevented from observing the trial, which is still awaiting a verdict.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We are alarmed by the deterioration in the level of freedom of religion or belief in China, not only during the Christmas period but in 2018 overall. The forced closure of places of worship, and the detention of citizens peacefully gathering for religious services, suggest a dangerous direction for religious freedom in China. We call on the authorities to end the practice of using “national security” as justification for detaining religious adherents and those who defend the right to freedom of religion or belief. We further call on the authorities to cease the forced closure and demolition of places of worship, and to release all those detained in connection with their beliefs or their defense of human rights, including Wang Quanzhang, Wang Yi and members of Early Rain Church, and all those arbitrarily detained in Xinjiang.”