



Refugee Documentation Centre (Ireland)
LEGAL AID BOARD

China - Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 30 July 2009

China: Treatment of Christians, freedom of religion, treatment of Christian priests and their families

The US Department of State report states in the opening comments in the 2008 International Religious Freedom Report:

“The Constitution and laws provide for freedom of religious belief and the freedom not to believe, although the Constitution only protects religious activities defined by the state as ‘normal.’ The Constitution states that religious bodies and affairs are not to be ‘subject to any foreign domination,’ and that the individual exercise of rights ‘may not infringe upon the interests of the state.’ The Constitution also recognizes the leading role of the officially atheist Chinese Communist Party. The Constitution and laws provide for freedom of religious belief and the freedom not to believe, although the Constitution only protects religious activities defined by the state as ‘normal.’ The Constitution states that religious bodies and affairs are not to be ‘subject to any foreign domination,’ and that the individual exercise of rights ‘may not infringe upon the interests of the state.’ The Constitution also recognizes the leading role of the officially atheist Chinese Communist Party.

The Government restricted legal religious practice to government-sanctioned organizations and registered religious groups and places of worship, and sought to control the growth and scope of the activity of both registered and unregistered religious groups, including ‘house churches.’ Government authorities limited proselytism, particularly by foreigners and unregistered religious groups, but permitted proselytism in state-approved religious venues and private settings.”
(US Department of State (19 September 2008) *2008 International Religious Freedom Report - China*)

This report also states in the same section:

“Unregistered Protestant religious groups in Beijing reported intensified harassment from government authorities in the lead up to the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. Media and China-based sources reported that municipal authorities in Beijing closed some house churches or asked them to stop meeting during the 2008 Summer Olympic Games and Paralympic Games. During the reporting period, officials detained and interrogated several foreigners about their religious activities and in several cases alleged that the foreigners had engaged in ‘illegal religious activities’ and cancelled their visas.” (Ibid)

This report states under 'Section 1: Religious Demography':

"The Government officially recognizes five main religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. There are five state-sanctioned "Patriotic Religious Associations" (PRAs) that manage the activities of the recognized faiths. The Russian Orthodox Church operates in some regions, particularly those with large populations of Russian expatriates or with close links to Russia. Foreign residents in the country who belonged to religious faiths not officially recognized by the Government were generally permitted to practice their religions." (Ibid)

This report states under the heading 'Section II: Status of Religious Freedom':

"The Constitution and laws provide for freedom of religious belief and the freedom not to believe. The Constitution protects only religious activities defined as 'normal.' The Constitution states that religious bodies and affairs are not to be 'subject to any foreign domination' and that the individual exercise of rights 'may not infringe upon the interests of the state.' The Constitution also recognizes the leading role of the officially atheist Chinese Communist Party. The Government sought to restrict legal religious practice to government-sanctioned organizations and registered places of worship and to control the growth and scope of the activity of both registered and unregistered religious groups, including house churches. The Government tried to prevent the rise of religious groups it viewed as constituting a source of authority outside of the Government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Government strongly opposed the profession of loyalty to religious leadership outside of the country. Nonetheless, the treatment of religious groups varied significantly from region to region, and membership in many faiths continued to grow rapidly.

Government officials at various levels have the power to determine the legality of religious activities by deciding whether they are 'normal.' Public Security Bureau (PSB) and Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) officials monitor unregistered facilities, check to see that religious activities do not disrupt public order, and take measures directed against groups designated as cults. Registered religious groups enjoy legal protections of their religious practices that unregistered religious groups do not receive, and unregistered groups are more vulnerable to coercive and punitive state action. The five PRAs are the only organizations registered with the Government at the national level as religious organizations under the Regulations on Social Organizations (RSO), administered by the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA). Leaders of the five PRAs sometimes serve in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), an advisory forum that is led by the CCP and consults with social groups outside the Party or the National People's Congress (NPC). The State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) and the CCP United Front Work Department (UFWD) provide policy 'guidance and supervision' on the implementation of regulations regarding religious activity, including the role of foreigners in religious activity. Employees of SARA and the UFWD are primarily Communist Party members who are directed by Party doctrine to be atheists.

The 2005 Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA) protect the rights of registered religious groups to possess property, publish literature, train and approve clergy, and collect donations. The Government had not issued implementing regulations by the end of the period covered by this report, and there was little evidence that the new regulations have themselves expanded religious freedom, in part because unregistered religious organizations have not been able to register under the RRA without first affiliating with a PRA. Before the passage of the RRA, a few Protestant groups reportedly registered independently of the TSPM/CCC. These included the Little Flock Protestant churches in Zhejiang and the (Korean) Chaoyang Church in Jilin Province. It was not clear whether these religious groups affiliated with the TSPM/CCC or whether they registered independently. The (Russian) Orthodox Church has been able to operate without affiliating with a PRA in a few areas.

While the activities of unregistered religious groups remained outside the scope of the RRA's legal protection, these groups and their activities continued to expand. Most Christian groups, the majority of which are not members of the PRAs, no longer operated in strict secrecy. Instead, they carried out public activities, including convening seminars, publishing materials, renting space for offices and events, and disseminating information on the Internet. Church summer camps and weekend retreats are also popular. Many unregistered religious groups also carried out social service work.

Both SARA and the TSPM/CCC state that registration regulations do not require that a congregation join either the TSPM or the CCC; however, nearly all local RAB officials require registered Protestant congregations and clergy to affiliate with the TSPM/CCC. Some unregistered religious groups who attempted to register were told by the RAB that their clergy did not have the requisite TSPM/CCC credentials. Other groups reported that authorities denied their applications without cause or detained group members who met with officials when they attempted to register. The Government contended that these refusals were the result of these groups' lack of adequate facilities or failure to meet other legal requirements.

Some unregistered Protestant groups refuse to register or affiliate with the TSPM/CCC because the TSPM/CCC puts submission to the CCP over submission to God. In particular, some house churches have objected to the TSPM's restrictions on evangelizing to or baptizing those under 18 and receiving religious materials from abroad, as well as its instructions to uphold Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong Thought. Moreover, some groups disagreed with the TSPM/CCC teachings that differences in the tenets of different Protestant creeds can be reconciled or accommodated under one "post-denominational" religious umbrella organization. Others did not seek registration independently or with one of the PRAs due to fear of adverse consequences if they revealed, as required, the names and addresses of church leaders or members. Unregistered groups also frequently did not affiliate with one of the PRAs for fear that doing so would allow government authorities to control sermon content and speakers.

A religious group may seek registration as 'a religious organization' or as a 'venue for religious activity.' According to RRA Chapter 3, Article 13, a religious group must first obtain registration as a "religious organization" in order to obtain

registration as a 'religious venue.' However, SARA has stated that in principle any unregistered group may register a venue without first becoming registered as a religious organization.

According to RRA Chapter 2, Article 6, registration as a 'religious organization' is governed by the "Regulations on the Management of Registration of Social Organizations" (RSO) which are administered by the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA). There are six requirements for registration under the RSO. These requirements are: 50 individual members or 30 institutional members, or a total of 50 members if there are both individual and institutional members; a standard name and organizational capacity; a fixed location; a staff with qualifications appropriate to the activities to the organization; lawful assets and a source of funds (i.e., national level organizations must have a minimum of \$14,620 (100,000 RMB) and local social and inter-area social organizations must have a minimum of \$4,381 (30,000 RMB); and legal liability in its own right. SARA has stated that there may only be one recognized organization per religion. The TSPM is the only registered Protestant religious organization registered under the RSO.

Registration of a venue must take place according to RRA Chapter 3, which lists five requirements in Chapter 3, Article 14: establishment of a site consistent with the overall purpose of the RRA which must not be used to 'disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens, or interfere with the educational system of the state,' or be 'subject to any foreign domination;' local religious citizens must have a need to carry out collective religious activities frequently; there must be religious personnel qualified to preside over the activities; the site must have the 'necessary funds;' and the site must be 'rationally located' so as not to interfere with normal production and neighboring residents. According to RRA Chapter 4, Article 27, clergy must report to the appropriate RAB after being certified by the concerned PRA.

A growing number of religious groups that have chosen to affiliate with a registered venue of the TSPM were now able to meet legally under the supervision of the venue.

Religious groups that remain unaffiliated and unregistered continued to be vulnerable to government interference. In September 2007 the Beijing municipal public security bureau (PSB) passed a regulation prohibiting landlords from renting properties to persons with 'irregular lifestyles,' including those who conduct illegal religious activities. Several house church groups reported that they were forced to change locations for their meetings after Beijing authorities threatened landlords with punishment for renting to them." (Ibid)

This report states under the sub-heading 'Restrictions of Religious Freedom':

"There were reports of repression of unregistered Protestant church networks and house churches during the reporting period. In some areas, government authorities pressured house churches to affiliate with one of the PRAs and to register with religious affairs authorities by organizing registration campaigns and by detaining and interrogating leaders who refused to register. In other parts of

the country unregistered groups grew rapidly and the authorities did not pressure them to register.” (Ibid)

This report states under the sub-heading ‘Abuses of Religious Freedom’:

“The Government detained, arrested, or sentenced to prison terms many religious leaders and adherents for activities related to their religious practice; however, the Government denied detaining or arresting anyone solely because of his or her religion. Local authorities often used an administrative process, through which citizens may be sentenced by a nonjudicial panel of police and local authorities to up to 3 years in reeducation-through-labor camps, to punish members of unregistered religious groups. During the reporting period, the Government reportedly held many religious adherents and members of spiritual movements in reeducation-through-labor camps because of their religious beliefs. In some areas security authorities used threats, demolition of unregistered property, extortion, interrogation, detention, physical attacks, and torture to harass leaders of unauthorized groups and their followers.” (Ibid)

This report states under the same section:

“A number of Protestant Christians who worshipped outside of government-approved venues, including in their homes, continued to face detention and abuse, especially for attempting to meet in large groups, traveling within and outside of the country for religious meetings, and otherwise holding peaceful religious assemblies in unregistered venues. According to overseas NGOs, raids by police and other security officials on Protestant religious meetings intensified during the reporting period.

In June 2008 several prominent religious leaders were harassed, placed under surveillance, restricted to their homes, or forced to leave Beijing during the visit of a delegation of foreign officials. These leaders included religious freedom attorneys Li Baiguang and Li Heping and Christian writer Yu Jie. Police also forced Pastor Zhang Mingxuan, president of the China House Church Alliance (CHCA), a network of house church groups that reportedly has 300,000 members, and his wife to relocate from Beijing to Hebei Province after they met with members of the visiting delegation. Authorities also reportedly ordered several Christian leaders to leave Beijing until after the Olympics.” (Ibid)

This report states under the same section:

“On May 2, 2008, PSB and RAB authorities raided the gathering of more than 40 members of the Chengdu Qiuyu Blessings Church near Shuangliu, Chengdu. The authorities questioned whether the gathering had been properly registered and told participants they were ‘suspected of being involved in illegal religious practices.’ The officials also confiscated Bibles, hymnals, and religious education materials.

On April 13, 2008, XUAR police took 46 Christians into custody who were worshipping at the home of Ding Zhichun in Shache County, Kashgar, XUAR. Authorities reportedly forced the Christians to confess to illegal worship activities

and to study the Government's handbook on religious policy. Forty-four were released following payment of a fine. The Government sentenced two church members to 15 days of administrative detention. Authorities detained nine house church members in March 2008 in Qu County, Sichuan Province, on suspicion of 'using an evil cult to obstruct the enforcement of the law.'

On December 7, 2007, authorities in Shandong Province's Linyi City raided a gathering of 270 leaders of unregistered Christian groups and detained 21 who were sentenced to reeducation-through-labor terms ranging from 1 to 3 years for belonging to an 'evil cult.'

On January 23, 2007, officials allegedly beat members of a house church in Kunming, Yunnan who protested against the seizing and burning of Christian books, including Bibles, by Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau officials on December 5, 2007.

On November 18, 2007, PSB officers in Henan detained 40 church leaders from the China Gospel Fellowship for up to 15 days. Families of the leaders were reportedly required to cover living expenses at the detention center.

In June 2006 police in Langzhong City, Sichuan Province, detained eight house church Christians. Four leaders of the church and three additional members were detained when they went to inquire about those detained at the public security office. House church members claimed they were beaten by police; the four leaders of the group who were detained were sentenced to 2 years of reeducation-through-labor. They were due for release at the end of July 2008.

Prominent house church leaders and their family members continued to serve time in prison." (Ibid)

This report states under the same section:

"In April 2007 Radio Free Asia reported that family planning officials in Baise, Guangxi Province, forced Wei Linrong, the wife of house church pastor Liang Yage, to have an abortion. According to the report, Liang and his wife did not want to have an abortion because it violated their religious beliefs.

In some locations, local authorities reportedly forced unregistered Catholic priests and believers to renounce ordinations approved by the Holy See, join the official church, or face a variety of punishments including fines, job loss, detentions, and having their children barred from school. Ongoing harassment of unregistered bishops and priests was reported, including government surveillance and repeated short detentions. Numerous detentions of unofficial Catholic clergy were reported, in particular in Hebei Province, traditionally home to many unregistered Catholics." (Ibid)

This report states under the heading 'Section III: Societal Abuses and Discrimination:

“In some parts of the country, there was a tense relationship between registered and unregistered Protestant churches and, according to press reports, between members of unregistered Protestant church groups. There were also tensions between unregistered and official Catholic communities in some provinces, including Hebei.” (Ibid)

In relation to general restrictions on religious freedom the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom report:

“The Chinese government engages in systematic and egregious violations of the freedom of religion or belief. Religious activities are tightly controlled and some religious adherents were detained, imprisoned, fined, beaten, and harassed. Yet, religious communities continue to grow rapidly in China and the freedom to participate in officially-sanctioned religious activity increased in many areas of the country over the past year. High-ranking Chinese government officials, including President Hu Jintao, have praised the positive role of religious communities in China and articulated a desire to have religious groups promote "economic and social development" – an endorsement that some believe may open legal space in the future for religious groups to conduct charitable, medical, and economic development activities. However, despite a growing "zone of toleration" for religious worship and charitable activities, the government continues to restrict religious practice to government-approved religious associations and seeks to control the activities, growth, and leadership of both "registered" and "unregistered" religious groups. In addition, the Chinese government hinders cooperation between religious communities and co-religionists abroad. In Tibetan Buddhist areas, religious freedom conditions may be worse now than at any time since the Commission's inception.” (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (1 May 2009) *USCIRF Annual Report 2009 - Countries of Particular Concern: People's Republic of China*)

This report also states:

“The law governing religion in China is the National Regulations on Religious Affairs (NRRA), first issued in March 2005 and updated in 2007. The regulations include provisions that require all religious groups and religious venues to affiliate with one of seven government-approved religious associations. When registered, religious communities can apply for permission to possess property, provide social services, accept donations from overseas, conduct religious education and training, and host inter-provincial religious meetings. Within the bounds allowed by the Chinese legal system where legal protections are sometimes overridden by political considerations, the NRRA expanded some protections for registered religious communities to carry out religious activities. However, the NRRA imposes restrictions that violate international norms regarding the protection of the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and it has been used to justify some arrests. By stipulating registration in government-sanctioned religious associations, insisting that permission be sought for most routine religious activities, and including specific requirements for government approval of Catholic and Tibetan Buddhist

groups' leadership decisions, the NRRA strengthens governmental management or supervision of religious affairs, thereby offering Party officials extensive control over religious practice and related activities. In addition, vague national security provisions in the NRRA override stated protections if a religious group is deemed to disrupt national unity or solidarity.

The NRRA only protects what the government considers "normal" religious activity, making unregistered religious groups illegal and subject to restriction, harassment or other punishments, including coercion, forced closure, beatings, confiscation of personal property, fines, and criminal prosecution. Enforcement varies by region and unregistered religious activity is tolerated in some provinces. Some Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, and members of spiritual movements have refused to join the officially-sanctioned religious organizations due to their reluctance to: 1) provide the names and contact information of their followers; 2) submit leadership decisions to the government or to one of the government-approved religious organizations; and 3) seek advance permission from the government for all major religious activities or theological positions. During the past year, Protestant "house church" groups and "underground" Catholic priests faced pressure to register with government-approved associations increased." (Ibid)

This report also states:

"The officially-sanctioned Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) does not allow its members or clergy to have relations or communication with the Vatican or other foreign Catholic organizations. This prohibition continues to strain relations between the CPA and the unregistered Catholic Church in China and between the Chinese government and the Holy See. Despite the official policy, an estimated 90 percent of CPA bishops and priests are secretly ordained by the Vatican and in many provinces, CPA and unregistered Catholic clergy and congregations work closely together. In some cases, the Vatican and the Chinese government have worked together on the selections of bishops. For example, in September 2007, bishops were ordained in Beijing, Guizhou, and three other dioceses with the approval of both the government and the Vatican. These ordinations reversed a trend of the government appointing bishops without Vatican approval. Nonetheless, the Chinese government took active steps to halt distribution of Pope Benedict's 2007 open letter to Chinese Catholics, including twice detaining Bishop Jia Zhiguo of Hebei province, and beating him while in custody, to prevent him from distributing the letter. In that letter, the Pope recognized that, although there have been some improvements, 'grave limitations' on religious freedom in China remain, which the Church cannot accept. Nevertheless, the Pope called on Chinese Catholics to adopt the approach of 'respectful and constructive dialogue.' More recently, Bishop Jia was arrested again on March 30, 2009 to prevent him from meeting with another bishop who had reconciled with the Vatican. Chinese officials objected to the relationship between the two bishops because it was 'desired by a foreign

power,' the Vatican, not by the government and the CPA. The Chinese government continues to maintain that normalization of ties with the Holy See will begin only if the Vatican revokes its diplomatic relations with Taiwan and agrees to cease its 'use of religion as a means to interfere in China's internal affairs.'

In the past year, harassment and detention of Catholics in China, especially unregistered bishops and priests, continued. The whereabouts of Catholic Bishop Wu Qinjing of the Zhouzhi diocese, who was detained in March 2007 by authorities in Shaanxi province, remain unknown. Bishop Wu was ordained in 2006 with Vatican approval, but without the approval of the local CPA. Fr. Wang Zhong is still serving the three-year sentence imposed in 2007 for reportedly organizing a ceremony to consecrate a new church registered with the government. In May 2008, Fr. Zhang Jianlin and Fr. Zhang Li were detained in Hebei province as they travelled to a well-known shrine in Shanghai; they reportedly remain in some sort of detention at this time. Although Bishop Yao Ling was released in January 2009 after serving a two year sentence, at least 40 Roman Catholic bishops or priests remain imprisoned, detained, or disappeared, including the elderly Bishop Su Zhimin, who has been in prison, in detention, under house arrest, or under strict surveillance since the 1970s. In addition, there is still no information on the whereabouts of Bishop Shi Enxiang, who was arrested in April 2001.

Members and leaders of unregistered Protestant groups in China continued to face harassment and harsh punishments, including detention, fines, beatings, confiscation of property, arrest, and mistreatment and torture in custody. In the last year, according to credible reports, 764 Protestant leaders and adherents were arrested for some period of time during the past year, 35 of whom were sentenced to terms of imprisonment over one year, including in China's infamous 're-education through labor' system. The State Department estimates that 'thousands' of house church members were detained for short periods in the last year. Arrests for and harassment of peaceful Protestant religious activity occurred in at least 17 provinces and two municipalities, with the most incidents occurring in Henan, Xinjiang, Shandong, Hebei, and Zhejiang provinces. Members of unregistered churches that the government deems 'evil cults' were the most vulnerable to detention. An extrajudicial security apparatus called the 6-10 Office, which was started to monitor and suppress Falun Gong activity, has broadened its mandate reportedly to include groups that self-identify as Protestant...

Chinese officials continue to use charges of 'illegal business activity' to sentence house church leaders who are involved in the printing and distribution of Bibles and other religious materials. In November 2007, Shi Weihuan served 37 days of criminal detention in Beijing for illegally publishing Bibles and Christian literature. He was arrested again in March 2008 and denied access to his lawyer until April; in June his sentence was extended for two months. He is currently awaiting trial. In May 2008, Pastor Dong Yutao was arrested for receiving a shipment of illegally imported Bibles." (Ibid)

A Response to an Information Request from the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada states in relation to the treatment of children of members of underground Christian churches:

“In 2 June 2008 correspondence, a representative of China Aid Association (CAA), a US-based, non-profit organization that investigates and advocates for religious freedom in China (CAA n.d.), indicated that ‘while there are no specific laws or regulations concerning the cessation of rights for children of house church Christians, there have been several instances of persecution amongst children of house church pastors and Christians’ (ibid. 2 June 2008a). In separate correspondence on the same date, another representative of CAA said that the organization had received reports indicating that ‘children of the underground church were discriminated [against], even expelled from schooling’ (ibid. 2 June 2008b).

Press releases on the CAA website report that Chinese authorities have arrested children following raids on Sunday schools or bible studies at unregistered churches (CAA 4 Apr. 2008; ibid. 19 May 2008; The New York Times 18 Aug. 2006; AFP 4 Aug. 2006). On 30 March 2008, four children were reportedly arrested with several underground church leaders following a Sunday school service in Qu County, Sichuan Province (CAA 4 Apr. 2008). The children were apparently released after interrogation (ibid.). One month earlier, the authorities reportedly arrested eleven minors and two adults at a house church bible study in Huocheng County, Xinjiang Province (ibid. 28 Feb. 2008; ibid. 19 May 2008). Information on when the children were released could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Cited in two other news sources, the CAA reported that in August 2006, 90 children and 40 adults were arrested in Tongwei Village in Anhui Province after their Sunday school was raided (The New York Times 18 Aug. 2006; AFP 4 Aug. 2006). The children and most of the adults were reportedly released once the authorities had registered their personal information (ibid.).

On 1 May 2007, Mission Network News (MNN), a Christian news service ‘dedicated to keeping Christians informed on evangelical mission activity around the world’ (MNN n.d.), reported that the authorities had arrested two children of underground Christians following a raid on a religious gathering that was attended by their parents (ibid. 1 May 2007). Further details on this case, including when or whether the children were released, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

In January 2008, local authorities reportedly evicted several children and their caretakers from a Christian orphanage in Hubei province as part of a “crackdown on Christian activities” (BosNewsLife 13 Jan. 2008). The authorities also reportedly ‘threatened’ landlords to prevent the orphanage from obtaining another rental space (ibid.).” (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (26 June 2008) *China: Treatment of children of members of underground Christian churches*)

AP reports:

“Pope Benedict XVI has made improving often-tense relations with Beijing a priority of his papacy and has sought to unify the country's faithful under his wing. But there has been little tangible evidence of progress in his four-year effort, and the Vatican recently denounced a new wave of arrests of underground priests and bishops and accused Beijing of mounting obstacles to a dialogue with the Holy See.

China forced its Roman Catholics to cut ties with the Vatican in 1951, shortly after the officially atheist Communist Party took power. Worship is allowed only in state-backed churches, which recognize the pope as a spiritual leader but appoint their own priests and bishops.

Millions of Chinese, however, belong to unofficial congregations that are loyal to Rome. Underground priests and bishops have been harassed or arrested by Beijing authorities.” (AP (25 May 2009) *Pope seeks urgent reconciliation in China church*)

Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports:

“Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is today expressing concern that China has rejected the UN Human Rights Council’s recommendations to improve human rights.

CSW remains particularly concerned about missing lawyer Gao Zhisheng and bookstore owner Shi Weihai, who has been sentenced to three years in prison.

The outcome of China’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the Human Rights Council was made public this week. China announced that it had “rejected, without a single exception, every recommendation made during the process that pertained to freedom of expression and freedom of association, independence of the judiciary, protection of human rights defenders, rights of ethnic minorities, reduction of the death penalty, prohibition of torture, media freedom and effective remedies for discrimination.”

Human rights lawyer, Gao Zhisheng, who worked to defend house church leaders from persecution, is still missing. Gao was last seen being hauled away by Chinese officials on 4 February 2009. The Chinese Ambassador to the United States, Zhou Wenzhong, issued a statement saying that Gao is “currently serving probation”. Since 2005, Gao has been repeatedly arrested, tortured and imprisoned.

According to China Aid, bookstore owner Shi Weihai has been sentenced by the Beijing court to three years in prison and fined 150,000 RMB (US\$21,795) for “illegal business operations”, involving printing and distributing Bibles at no cost. Shi’s family are concerned about his serious diabetic condition and requests for medical parole have been refused.

In a major crackdown earlier this month the licences of at least 21 human rights lawyers have been cancelled or had their renewals refused. Many of these lawyers, like Gao, have worked to defend religious freedom cases.” (Christian Solidarity Worldwide (26 June 2009) *China - CSW calls for the release of Gao Zhisheng and Shi Weihai, as China rejects recommendations from UN*)

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

Sources consulted

Amnesty International

Christian Solidarity Worldwide

Ecoi.net

Freedom House

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Lexis Nexis

Refugee Documentation Centre

Refworld

UK Home Office

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

US Department of State