

Christians form human shield around church in China after demolition threat.

Christians form human shield around church in 'China's Jerusalem' after demolition threat. Christians have flocked to defend a church in eastern China after Communist Party officials claimed it was an "illegal construction" and announced plans to demolish it. Thousands of Chinese Christians have mounted an extraordinary, round-the-clock defence of a church in a city known as the 'Jerusalem of the East'



Thousands of Chinese Christians have mounted an extraordinary, round-the-clock defence of a church in a city known as the 'Jerusalem of the East' after Communist Party officials threatened to bulldoze their place of worship.

In an episode that underlines the fierce and long-standing friction between China's officially atheist Communist Party and its rapidly growing Christian congregation, Bible-carrying believers this week flocked to the Sanjiang church in Wenzhou hoping to protect it from the bulldozers.

Their 24-hour guard began earlier this week when a demolition notice was plastered onto the newly-constructed church which worshippers say cost around 30 million yuan (£2.91 million) and almost six years to build.

Officials claimed the church had been built illegally and used red paint to daub the words: "Demolish" and "Illegal construction" onto its towering facade.

The threat triggered a furious reaction in Wenzhou, a booming port city known for its vibrant Christian community, said to be China's largest.

Hundreds of people, including elderly and in some cases disabled women, have now occupied the church to prevent demolition teams moving in.

"There are bad people out there trying to damage our church so we must defend it," said Li Jingliu, a 56-year-old former factory worker who has been sleeping in one of its back offices since Wednesday.

"I've come here today to show my support. A church is a scared place and we are all brothers and sisters," said Jin Yufu, 55, from the nearby community of Wenling. "Christianity has made a big contribution to society in many ways. Thanks to Church we don't smoke, gamble or drink. Christians are good people."

Wenzhou, a wealthy coastal city around 230 miles south of Shanghai in Zhejiang province, has around seven million residents. Local Christians claim as many as 15 per cent of them are church goers, the majority Protestant.

Red crosses and spires still adorn the skyline of a city where British missionaries, including George Stott, set up churches towards the end of the 19th century.

Wenzhou's underground "house" churches – those unwilling to comply with Communist Party rules – have long been subjected to sporadic crackdowns, such as one in 2000 that saw hundreds of churches and temples demolished across Zhejiang province.

However, the Sanjiang church is part of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, China's officially sanctioned and government-controlled Protestant church, making this week's stand-off highly unusual.



Parishioners believe their church was targeted after Xia Baolong, the provincial Party chief, visited the region and was unimpressed by the prominence of a church built to house thousands of worshippers.

"His behaviour is illegal. He has abused his power. The construction of the church is not against the law," said Wang Jianfeng, a 47-year-old man from a nearby congregation who was among hundreds of people gathered on the steps outside on Friday in a show of force.

Wen Xiaowu, another visitor, said he believed China's president would be "displeased" with his Communist colleagues in Zhejiang.

"Xi Jinping has said society should be harmonious. He is very open-minded about disciples of the Christian church."

Sanjiang's resistance has been organised with almost military precision. A makeshift kitchen behind the altar provides rice, pork and fried liver with leeks for those occupying the church while women hand out bottles of water and satsumas at the entrance.

By day, Christians from around the province crowd the church's steps, with undercover security agents mingling among them, snapping photos and eavesdropping. By night, hundreds of worshippers take it in turns to keep watch, grabbing a few hours of sleep on cramped wooden pews between shifts.

He Hongying, an 81-year-old member of the resistance, said she would stay for as long as necessary. "I slept here last night and I will do the same again tonight. We pulled two pews together so it was quite all right. We feel at peace and fearless when we are with our God."

The dispute over Sanjiang has highlighted the ongoing difficulties facing China's fast growing Christian community. In 1949, when the Communist Party took over, it boasted around one million

members. Today, there are thought to be more Chinese Christians than Communist Party members, with up to 100 million mainland believers, according to some estimates.

Life has improved since the days of Mao Tse-tung, who saw religion as "poison" and presided over the decade-long Cultural Revolution when churches were ransacked and burned.

However, campaigners say that while the constitution guarantees freedom of religion, Beijing still maintains a tight-grip on what many leaders see as a potential challenge to their authority.

Members of Sanjiang's congregation said that, under Chinese law, they were only allowed to worship on Sundays. Preachers were required to avoid politically sensitive topics.

During a visit to China last month, Michelle Obama, the US First Lady, hinted at concerns over religious freedom here, telling an audience: "When it comes to expressing yourself freely, and worshipping as you choose, and having open access to information – we believe those are universal rights that are the birthright of every person on this planet."

A woman who introduced herself as a representative of the local government rejected claims the Communist Party was persecuting local Christians.

"They can believe. This is free. We can't control them," said the woman, who gave her name as Zhang Biyao.

Ms Zhang said the church had been illegally built and was structurally unsound. The government wanted to protect "people's safety," she claimed.

Sanjiang's congregation was unconvinced.

Yang Zhumei, 74, said she had pleaded with officials to leave her church alone.

"I held their hands and said, "Comrades, don't take down our cross. I can give you my head instead."

"Even if they take my head, I can still find happiness with God," she shouted.

Li Jingliu, who lost her right arm to an industrial accident and has been a church member for 34 years, said she would not allow her place of worship to be damaged. "I will guard the church until the very end, without fearing hardship or death," she said. "God will punish those who try to take down the cross."

Tom Phillips - The Telegraph