

China church demolitions may be slowing down

Watchdog says more than 400 crosses removed and 35 churches destroyed last year



This image taken on April 30, 2014 shows a church in the town of Oubei, outside the city of Wenzhou, that Chinese authorities had begun demolishing on April 28 (AFP Photo/Mark Ralston)

More than one year since provincial authorities in Zhejiang began demolishing and removing crosses at hundreds of churches, the campaign may have slowed, according to a timeline published on Thursday by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW).

In the most comprehensive summary to date on what has been among Asia's most destructive anti-Christian campaigns of recent times, CSW recorded at least 400 crosses removed, and a further 35 churches wholly or partially destroyed in Zhejiang.

“Although the Chinese government claims that the church demolitions have nothing to do with religion, the scope of the demolitions indicated by the timeline tells a different story,” said CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas.

Authorities in Zhejiang have maintained that the campaign is against all structures that violate building codes, not just churches.?

But in what appear to be leaked provincial government documents dated February last year, Communist Party cadres in Zhejiang were warned of religion that “has grown too fast” and ordered to achieve results against religion “within a year”.

The CSW timeline appears to correlate with the orders of Zhejiang authorities, showing that cross removals and demolitions peaked between April and July.

During this three-month period, crosses were removed and buildings destroyed at more than 230 churches in Zhejiang province.

Since then, the pace appears to have slowed. In December, CSW recorded four such incidents.

“It seems the campaign is fading,” said a lay leader in Zhejiang who declined to be named for security reasons.

As part of what appears to be the first orders issued by the provincial government in the wake of the campaign, officials are now regulating the scale of crosses.

“The size depends on the requirement of the religious affairs bureau in different localities,” the lay leader added.

During the crackdown at least 100 people have been arrested, detained or summoned, according to CSW, and 35 people injured, mostly while trying to protect churches from baton-wielding police.

So far, Catholic and Protestant Church leaders have failed to secure any form of redress.

Last month, a Wenzhou court refused to accept cases by Protestant Pastor Huang Yizi who claimed he was wrongfully detained and tricked into dismissing his lawyers after he was taken into custody for trying to prevent the removal of a cross by authorities.

CSW said that the campaign had caused significant unease among Christians, not just in Zhejiang but across all of China.

“We renew our call for the Chinese authorities to make consistent efforts to enter into dialogue with religious leaders, with a view to promoting mutual trust and positive relations; to provide clear instructions about the process of applying for permission to build a religious structure; and to establish a complaints mechanism for religious buildings which have been refused permission to build,” said Thomas.

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