



NEWS REPORT

from UCA News



Violence, Harassment Against Hebei Catholics Reported

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HONG KONG (UCAN) - Reports of violence and harassment against "underground" Catholic peasants in Baoding diocese, south of Beijing, have been received here, despite restrictions on villagers ability to move around.

Catholic sources told UCA News in mid-January that Father Peter Hu Duo of the diocese in Hebei province had been arrested and seriously beaten by officials Dec 20 in his sister's home in Xushui county, near Baoding city.

The officials reportedly said that Father Hu's legs were broken due to the beating, and his whereabouts are unknown, the sources said.

The priest had just been released from a re-education-through-labor camp prior to the incident, they added.

Baoding diocese, about 140 kilometers southwest of Beijing, has been a stronghold of underground Catholics, and government crackdowns on their activities and violence against them have been reported frequently.

Sources also reported that three Catholic lay leaders of Liangzhuang village in Xushui county were attacked by a masked mob Dec 24.

The three were said to have required hospitalization after being gagged, blindfolded and beaten with electric batons and other implements.

One of them who was able to recognize some of the attackers was threatened not to speak out, the sources noted.

The mob set fire to cushions in a prayer meeting place in the village, and to the property of a woman who protested. They beat the woman and her 16-year-old son who came to help. The son had to be hospitalized, the sources said.

In another case, a 12-year-old girl in the same village was questioned by officials as to why she became a liturgy lector. Following the girl's reply that she wished to adore the Lord and would continue to do so, she was beaten so badly that she had to be hospitalized, the sources said.

They added that local officials had tried to block news of the violent acts in Liangzhuang by limiting the Catholic villagers' freedom to move.

Meanwhile, in the early morning of Dec 25, after a door-to-door search, underground Catholics in Nangan Machi village in Baoding were found meeting at a vegetable shed to celebrate Christmas and were detained by public security officials, sources said. Each was fined 500 to 1000 yuan (US\$ 60-120) for "illegal assembly", but none of them paid the fine. All of them were released the next day, but the electricity to their homes was cut off, the sources noted.

In Baoding city, they said, some 40 public security officials surrounded the home of an elderly laywoman on Christmas eve and forbade Catholics from entering the house, which has served as a worship place.

The officials did not allow the six laypeople who were already praying inside the house to leave until Dec. 25 morning.

According to the sources, the whereabouts of Bishop James Su Zhimin (Zhemin) of Baoding and his auxiliary Bishop An Shuxin, both of whom were arrested in 1996, are still unknown.

Father Cui Xiingang, pastor of Donglu church, also arrested in 1996, is still detained in Qingyuan county, southeast of Baoding, they added.

Government forces demolished the popular Donglu Marian shrine near Baoding in 1996 and have forbidden the large annual May pilgrimage to the site since.

Meanwhile, Catholic sources from northwestern Gansu province told UCA News last November that local governments have banned the use of many underground Church meeting points for religious activities.

Also Bishop Andrew Tsien Tchew-Choenn of Hualien, Taiwan, who supports the underground Church in mainland China, told UCA News Jan 22 he had learned that underground Catholics ini

Gansu, Hebei, Henan and other provinces had experienced government crackdowns to deter them from celebrating Christmas.

"Even if they (underground Catholics) have committed any wrong, we request the government to handle them with leniency," he said.

Liu rejected that the issue of the underground Church should be dealt with through love and the differences between the open and underground Church is not a matter of faith, but of different political views.

Some foreign reports about the underground Church only hamper evangelization in China, where many people ask why Catholics defame the country and why Catholics should be treated differently if they break the law, he said.