

International

In 'China's Jerusalem', faith trumps Sunday School ban

As religion grows, Beijing warns against 'Western' ideas

WENZHOU: When authorities in China's southeastern city of Wenzhou outlawed Sunday School earlier this year, Christian parents determined their children must still learn about Jesus and the Bible. Churches in Wenzhou started teaching children in private homes or at other venues. Some billed Sunday School classes as daycare, not education, or moved them to Saturdays, more than a dozen local Christians told Reuters.

Wenzhou, sometimes known as "China's Jerusalem" due to its sizable Christian community, is at the forefront of a growing standoff between China's leadership and the country's devout over religious education for children. The ruling and officially atheist Communist Party has increased efforts to curb the influence of Christianity, tightening restrictions on faith classes and warning against the religion's "Western" ideas.

But Christians say the resolve of the community in Wenzhou suggests the party will struggle to exert control over the next generation of the country's 60 million Christians. In her house, "faith comes first, grades come second," said one parent surnamed Chen, asking not to use her full name due to the sensitivity of the matter. Immaculately turned out in a cream fur coat and wearing a giant turquoise ring, Chen is one of Wenzhou's numerous wealthy Christians who say their children must attend Bible classes because state education fails to provide sufficient moral and spiritual guidance.

"Drugs, porn, gambling and violence are serious problems among today's youth and video games are extremely seductive," she told Reuters. "We cannot be by his side all the time so only through faith can we make him understand (the right thing to do)." In some districts of Wenzhou, in Zhejiang province, an official edict has prohibited Sunday Schools since August, according to three sources with direct knowledge of the matter. The provinces of Zhejiang, Fujian, Jiangsu, Henan and the autonomous region of Inner Mongolia have barred children from faith activities including summer camp, Christian news site World Watch Monitor reported in September.

Sources spoken to by Reuters were unaware if the policy was a local government initiative or centrally mandated. They also did not know of any similar bans in other regions of China. Also in September, new rules were released expanding state oversight of religious education

nationwide in what officials say is an attempt to create a new generation of religious leaders loyal to the party. China's State Administration for Religious Affairs and the foreign affairs office of the Wenzhou city government did not reply to faxed requests for comment.

Explosion of belief

In the last four decades of economic prosperity, China's faithful have multiplied rapidly. Official numbers say there are now around 30 million Christians, while independent estimates suggest the number is about 60 million, most of whom are Protestants. In Wenzhou, a small Christian community started by 19th century missionaries has bloomed to over one million Christians. Until recent years, they had enjoyed a relatively relaxed relationship with local officials, residents said.

Then, in 2014, a government campaign to demolish "illegal" churches and tear down the crosses that adorned them sparked an outcry from the Christian community and sowed mistrust of authorities among believers. The campaign came shortly after President Xi Jinping, who had been communist party chief of Zhejiang from 2002 to 2007, was appointed General Secretary of the party. But attempts to stem the rapid growth of believers has struggled in Wenzhou where churches, often funded by devout local business owners, are ubiquitous.

"Wenzhou government does not let churches register, because there are way too many, so there are lots of house churches and it is tough for the government to manage them," Zhao Gang, the minister at Wenzhou's Church of the Rose-tinted Clouds said. Sunday School textbooks have been especially sensitive in the clampdown in Wenzhou, teachers said. The government restricts religious publications, and churches often use translated texts from overseas. One teacher said classes resumed when they stopped using unsanctioned textbooks and avoided the words "Sunday School".

Freedom for all

Chinese law officially grants religious freedom for all, including children, but regulations on education and protection of minors also say religion cannot be used to hinder state education or to "coerce" children to believe.



Christians pursue religious education in spite of ban



SHANGHAI: A Chinese visitor looks on as he wraps himself with Disney blanket at Shanghai Disneyland in Shanghai. —AFP

Local governments in troubled areas of China, such as the far western region of Xinjiang, ban children attending religious events, but Christian communities elsewhere rarely face blanket restrictions. This year, the party has been unusually strict in warning university students, state-owned enterprise employees and officials themselves against celebrating Christmas, with admonitions such as to "resist the corrosion of Western religious culture", according to state media reports.

While parents in Wenzhou want to control their children's education, the government is working to create a new crop of religious leaders loyal to the party. New rules governing religious schools from China's cabinet, due to take effect in February, are necessary to meet China's "pressing need" for patriotic religious leaders. Wang Zuoan, the head of China's official State Administration of Religious Affairs, told Reuters in written comments in

October. "We hope that the talent graduating from religious schools will be up to standard in both their political and religious character and will do a good job of combining love for the country with love for religion," he said.

But for many Christians allowing the party to control religious education is unacceptable, as it requires putting the party before God, according to Sarah Cook, a New York-based analyst at Freedom House, an advocacy group. As such, the party can only do so much to control faith education. "There are always going to be kids at home whose bedtime stories are from the Bible," Cook said. For Chen in Wenzhou, faith should be at the forefront of education until believers outnumber atheists in China's young. "There will definitely be more Christian believers in the next generation," she said. "The ability for the Christian faith to be inherited and passed on is ever growing." —Reuters

Venezuela frees 80 opponents in rare goodwill gesture

CARACAS: Venezuelan authorities late Saturday began releasing some of those detained during demonstrations against President Nicolas Maduro's socialist government, a rare goodwill gesture to the opposition at the end of a politically torrid year. Deley Rodriguez, the president of the assembly and head of its Truth Commission investigating the protests, said that Christmas was "a moment of reconciliation" as she announced the decision to release around 80 people. Among the first freed was Alfredo Ramos, mayor of the northwestern municipality of Iribarren, who was arrested late July and handed a 15 month sentence, and a dozen police officers from Chacao municipality, an opposition stronghold of Caracas.

State television showed image of Rodriguez meeting with the group. "You go back to jail for the medical check and then you go home to spend Christmas with your families," she said. "I feel happy for my freedom," Ramos told journalists upon his release. "It was a hard test, quite difficult." But he also lashed out at his sentence. "It was an arbitrary, unjust detention-I committed no crime," he added. Venezuela, whose oil reserves once made it the region's richest country, has been paralyzed in recent years by economic collapse and political conflict.

Opposition forces accuse Maduro of dismantling democratic institutions and setting up the Constituent Assembly to rubber-stamp his policies, with widespread protests breaking out this year. Supplies of food and medicine have become scarce, taking an ever-greater toll on



CARACAS: A man dressed as Santa Claus is seen during the event 'Santa en las calles' in the Pastora shantytown in Caracas. —AFP

people's health, and hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans have chosen to emigrate. The fate of those imprisoned has been a subject of negotiations between the government and the opposition Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) in the Dominican Republic, as both sides seek a solution to the country's grave political and economic crisis.

A third round of talks is set for January 11 and 12. Earlier this week, Venezuelan opposition leaders asked Maduro to free "political prisoners"-whose numbers one non-governmental group has put at 268 - before Christmas as a gesture of good will. On Thursday, the regional trade bloc Mercosur also called for their release. The government has insisted that all are being held for acts of violence, conspiracy or treason, not as "political prisoners". Rodriguez said those affected were being held in both civilian and military prisons, and she suggested community service as an alternative to imprisonment. Some were detained in 2014 protests, and others this year. —AFP

joint investigation team has excavated the soil, and sifted it. It can't be possible on that place that there are a lot of human remains."

'Disrespectful to victims'

"It is curious," he said, adding "it seems like someone withheld human remains to release them now and then, and get publicity about it". Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was shot down in July 2014 over war-torn Ukraine, killing all 298 people on board most of them Dutch. An international investigation concluded the plane was hit by a Russian-made BUK missile transported across the border into Ukraine from Russia and fired from territory held by separatists pro-Russia rebels.

Ploeg's 58-year-old brother, Alex, is one of only two victims who has not yet been identified, and fresh videoed reports of new finds are painful. "It's good when human remains return to the next-of-kin let's be clear about that. But playing games with them, is not good. That's bad behavior from the journalists," Ploeg said.

"It's disrespectful to the victims and very difficult to see for the next-of-kin," he added, calling for anyone with remains to "please handle them with respect and hand them to the authorities and don't use any publicity." Lancaster did not immediately reply to an AFP request for comment. Alex Ploeg died alongside his wife, Edith, and 18-year-old son Robert. His two daughters had not joined them on the holiday trip, and survived. "We had a funeral with two coffins and one photo... we didn't have a funeral for my brother as we can't say goodbye to his remains. That's very strange. It's very painful," Ploeg said. —AFP

MH17 families voice concerns over new discovery of remains

THE HAGUE: Relatives of those killed in the MH17 air disaster have called for greater respect for victims' remains fearing some may be "playing a game" after a new discovery of bones. Freelance journalist Patrick Lancaster revealed in a YouTube video on December 11 that he had found 52 bones and remains on the site of the 2014 crash in eastern Ukraine. His video shows him apparently excavating the remains from the snow-covered crash site in rebel-held territory. It comes after Lancaster maintained he had discovered remains in August and handed them over to local mayor, saying he was trying to do it "in the most professional way possible."

And in January, Dutch police seized possible human remains from a Dutch journalist which he said he found on the site. But Lancaster's latest find has puzzled relatives and the MH17 Foundation, who are calling for any outstanding remains to be handed over immediately to be identified and returned to the next-of-kin. "The circumstances of the findings are a little suspicious," Piet Ploeg, the chairman of the foundation said yesterday. The remains were found "exactly on the place where the

UPTO **2000** K.D INSTANT CASH
RESALE VALUE GUARANTEE

5 YEARS WARRANTY & SERVICE*

Monthly From **K.D 105**

X7 SPORT

- Sport Family SUV
- 6-Speed Transmission
- 2400 CC
- Panoramic ROOF
- Power Leather Seats
- Front & Rear Sensor
- 8" Screen with GPS • LED
- Rear View Camera • Bluetooth
- USB • Blind Spot Monitor

Monthly From **K.D 109**

EMGRAND GT

- Large Sedan for 5 Passengers
- 4 & 6 Cylinder Available
- Panoramic ROOF
- Power Leather Seats
- Front & Rear Sensor
- 8" Screen with GPS • Bluetooth
- Rear Power Curtain • LED
- Rear View Camera
- Front & Rear USB
- Blind Spot Monitor

Monthly From **K.D 99**

EMGRAND GS

- Compact SUV
- 6-Speed Transmission, 1800 CC
- Panoramic Roof
- Power Leather Seats
- Rear Sensor
- 8" Screen with Smart Link
- LED • Rear View Camera
- Bluetooth • USB
- 18" Inch Rims

Designed in Sweden
Assembled in China

Working Hours
Saturday - Thursday
From: 9:00 am - 8:00 pm

Hot Line
1820 888

Kuwait Automotive Imports Co. W.L.L.

Hot Line
1820 888