

China's Catholics celebrate tense Easter

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BEIJING (AFP) — Easter for China's Catholics has a familiar ring this year as priests and activists say 60 years of government repression of those loyal to the Pope shows no sign of easing.

"The situation is going from bad to worse," said Joseph Kung of the Cardinal Kung Foundation, a US-based Catholic activist group.

Followers of the underground Church continue to be detained, he said.

China has millions of Catholics who either attend mass at official churches overseen by the communist government, or who are part of illegal, "underground" congregations.

The latter are loyal to the Pope, and run the risk of being questioned, beaten and even imprisoned, according to Kung and other critics.

In a case raised by the Vatican, underground bishop Jia Zhiguo has been in detention since March 30 in the northern province of Hebei, bringing to 13 the number of confrontations he has had with police since 2004.

Kung also said police took away Ma Shengbao, a priest from Hebei, on March 24 and he has not been heard from since, while other church leaders have been jailed.

Local police refused to comment when contacted by AFP.

But Liu Bainian, vice-chairman of China's Patriotic Association, the government-run entity that oversees officially registered Catholics, said people in China are never detained because of their beliefs.

"Religion is free," he said, adding he was unaware if Jia had been detained or not, and that he had never heard of Ma.

"But no matter who breaks the law, they all need to be handled according to the law," he said, adding: "It's the same in every country."

Liu also insisted that China's Catholics would be enjoying Easter.

"All Catholics are celebrating Easter," he said.

The Patriotic Association estimates there are 5.6 million followers of the government-controlled church, while the number of worshippers in the underground church is thought to be around 12 million.

China severed its ties with the Vatican in 1951 to protest the Holy See's diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. It set up the Patriotic Association six years later to formally oversee officially-registered Catholics.

Gao Jianli, a priest in the northern province of Shaanxi who operates in a grey zone as his church is underground but still tolerated by the government, described life for Chinese Catholic as "difficult".

"In China, one has freedom of belief but not freedom of religious life," he told AFP.

"For many religious festivals, when we want to go ahead with public activities, one must always make a request, and authorities do not give us permission every time."

Anthony Lam, senior researcher at the Hong Kong-based Holy Spirit Study Centre, said the appointment of a number of bishops by the Chinese government had also been postponed since last year.

"Clearly the government thinks the best way currently is to keep the status quo, and this is quite harmful as China normally consecrates three or four bishops annually," he said.

China's appointment of bishops in its church has long been a sticking point with the Vatican, which insists it is the Pope's duty.

China, however, believes it is its internal affair, which should not be subject to interference from external powers.

The Vatican has been working towards reconciliation with Beijing and has said it is willing to cut ties with Taiwan, but the issue of who appoints bishops remains a major sticking point.

In 2007, in an apparent thaw in relations, Beijing appointed church leaders who had the blessing of the Pope, but Kung said there has been no recent improvement in talks.

The Patriotic Association's Liu, however, said he was optimistic that relations would move forward.

"I believe there will definitely be a day when relations between China and the Vatican will improve," he said.

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