

Carbon monoxide poisoning kills 11 Chinese Catholic girls in dorm

YAN'AN, China - Carbon monoxide poisoning, apparently from burning coal in a school dormitory in Shaanxi province, killed 11 Catholic girls ages 8-10 and left a 12th girl in a coma.

The 12 pupils from various Catholic villages were burning charcoal with the windows closed Dec. 1, trying to keep warm in freezing weather, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News. Burning charcoal produces large amounts of carbon monoxide, an odorless but poisonous gas.

Using a coal stove in winter to heat houses in northern China is common.

China's official Xinhua News Agency reported Dec. 4 that police said they believe a quilt fell on the stove during the night. It caught fire, then ignited coal being stored under one of the beds. As the coals smoldered, the students were poisoned by the gas.

The incident at the state-run Duiziliang School in Dingbian county came to light when the girls failed to appear at the morning assembly in the school playground.

Xinhua reported the students were rushed to the Dingbian hospital, where doctors confirmed carbon monoxide poisoning as the cause of death. According to the report, the Chinese government has listed the incident as a "severe safety accident." Police were investigating it and the school's headmaster was dismissed.

Father Li Jingyan, parish priest of the Duiziliang church, told UCA News Dec. 4 that he and all the parishioners were deeply saddened. He said he and other church workers have tried to console the girls' families. The parish is in the Diocese of Yan'an, based less than 450 miles southwest of Beijing.

The bodies of the 11 girls who died were cremated Dec. 4, and the ashes were to be buried in the coming days, the priest said.

Survivor Cai Maomao, 10, had the flu and completely covered herself with a blanket that night, Father Li reported, saying this might have kept her from inhaling a fatal amount of the deadly gas.

“She is now in a coma. We all hope God will protect her and save her life,” he said.

The 12 children stayed at the dormitory, he said, because their families all live seven to 10 miles from the school. He said each dormitory ward accommodates 12 pupils in six bunk beds. The temperature in the area lately has fallen as low as 23 degrees Fahrenheit.

Father Li said two teachers are usually on duty as wardens to check on the charcoal stove, the windows and the condition of the boarders during the night. He wondered whether the wardens had checked the girls’ ward that night.

A nun serving in the area, who asked not to be named, said the mother of one of the girls told her, “I believe God loves his child and has called her back to heaven.”