

China restricts unregistered clergy as Olympics approach

BEIJING – Catholic clergy who work near Beijing and have not registered with the Chinese government faced restrictions on their work as the 2008 Olympic Games approached.

The government has forbidden unregistered bishops and priests to administer sacraments or do pastoral work since late July, and some bishops have been put under house arrest, church sources told the Asian church news agency UCA News.

In Beijing, a layman from an unregistered church community told UCA News in early August that most priests who had been working semiclandestinely in the capital have returned to their hometowns until the Olympics end.

While these priests are out of town, he said, they agreed to have their parishioners attend Masses led by registered priests in Beijing, since Bishop Joseph Li Shan of Beijing has papal approval.

The layman said that as the Olympics neared, the government started imposing strict controls on people from other provinces entering Beijing. Officials tightened security checks in residential areas as well as at subway stations and other public transportation centers.

The Olympics and the Paralympic Games are scheduled for Aug. 8-24 and Sept. 6-17, respectively.

The Chinese government requires the registration of bishops and church communities. Some Catholics view registration as a tool for control and prefer to exercise the faith in a semiclandestine manner. Pope Benedict XVI has urged the two Catholic communities to unite.

In Tianjin municipality and Hebei province, which surround Beijing, church sources told UCA News unregistered bishops have been put under house arrest and strict surveillance and are forbidden to contact their priests.

They also said that government officials in those areas said clergy without permits from the Catholic Patriotic Association, which functions as a liaison between the registered churches and the State Administration for Religious Affairs, are forbidden to celebrate Mass or administer any sacraments, including the anointing of the sick.

Some priests said they were warned not to leave their hometowns, while Catholic villagers said they were warned not to receive unregistered priests who usually stay at the laypeople's homes. Anyone violating the orders would be fined heavily, they added.

In Wuqiu village in Hebei, where Bishop Julius Jia Zhiguo of Zhengding resides, a small house was built in April in front of the cathedral for public security officers to guard the unregistered bishop around-the-clock, church sources told UCA News in early August. Previously, these officers had rented a residential house nearby to monitor the prelate.

Sources reported officers now take eight-hour shifts and enter the bishop's residence in the cathedral compound every two hours to check on 73-year-old Bishop Jia, who is on medication. Although laypeople living outside Wuqiu have been warned not to visit the cathedral, the prelate still insists on celebrating Mass there every day, the sources said.

They noted that, with the Aug. 15 feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary falling during the Olympics, unregistered Catholic communities are monitoring the security situation and will decide whether or not to gather to celebrate the feast.

In eastern China, unregistered priests in Anhui and Shandong provinces face similar restrictions, UCA News learned.

In northeastern China, Bishop Joseph Wei Jingyi of Qiqihar told UCA News Aug. 5 that government officials recently phoned him and asked if he would be traveling or holding any religious gatherings during the coming days.

"I know they don't want us to organize any activities during the Olympics," the 50-year-old prelate said. He said he told the officials he "won't go anywhere, but will support the Olympics at home, in front of the television." His diocese in Heilongjiang

province has not held any special Masses for the Olympics, but Catholics will pray for the success of the event at Sunday Masses, he said.

He added that he learned some unregistered priests who serve Catholics in Beijing and its surrounding areas have returned home or decided to vacation in northeastern China, where the weather is cooler, to avoid problems and inconveniences. Laypeople will be safe as long as they pray at home and do not join religious gatherings, he added.

In Inner Mongolia, an underground priest told UCA News Aug. 2 that local priests have canceled catechism classes for young people and pilgrimages this summer to avoid trouble. Priests now spend their time visiting laypeople living in remote villages and playing sports to keep fit and deepen their fraternity, he said.

In southeastern China, church sources told UCA News that local officials have not imposed restrictions or given warnings to the unregistered communities in Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, but priests there are conscious of not organizing large-scale activities during the Olympics.