

## Chinese authorities take down Catholic Church cross

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Chinese authorities have taken down the first Catholic Church cross this year in Wenzhou Diocese in the latest sign the removal campaign in Zhejiang province is continuing.

Government officials removed the cross of Zhuangyuan Church in Yongqiang parish just before dawn on Feb. 25, two weeks after Zhejiang's religious affairs director called for "religious stability" ahead of the G20 Summit in the provincial capital Hangzhou in September.

The "underground" Catholic community in Yongqiang parish called an emergency meeting the previous evening amid warnings the cross was about to be removed. They were unable to stop state officials despite resisting a similar attempt to remove the cross last year.

"The person in charge of the church did not inform the parish priest about the removal this time, possibly because government officials threatened him to keep quiet," an underground church worker told ucanews.com on condition of anonymity. "When the priest realized the situation from others, he called a meeting immediately."

At least 18 Protestant church crosses have been removed in Zhejiang so far this year. But this is the first time authorities have targeted the much smaller Catholic community — an estimated 210,000 people — amid an ongoing campaign in which more than 1,700 crosses have been removed since the end of 2013.

Authorities also appeared to be targeting another Catholic church in Yongqiang parish — Bajia Church — following reports the local government ordered electricity and water to be cut off to the building on Feb. 24.

"The Chinese New Year ended on Feb. 22. So everyone is back at work, including the religious officials and demolition workers," wrote the Catholic Evangelization Group on Wechat, a popular social media app in China.

The latest cross removal in Zhejiang follows a provincial Religious Affairs Commission video conference on Feb. 4, in which director Feng Zhili told officials to be prepared to maintain "religious stability" before the G20 Summit in Hangzhou on Sept. 4-5, reported local media.

In an apparent effort to contain simmering discontent among the millions of Christians who live in Zhejiang province, authorities have ordered no more cross removals in Hangzhou itself before the G20.

"Even if there are cross removals, they [authorities] said they would seek approval from the diocese first," said a priest in Hangzhou who asked not to be named. "But I am not certain authorities will really stop removing crosses as policy often changes."

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