

Chinese Christians find support in Africa

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Nairobi, Kenya, May 20 (ENInews)--Anglican clergy in East Africa have expressed hope for an improved relationship between church and state in China, after a delegation from China's Ministry of State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) visited Kenya and Uganda.

"They wanted to see how they can build a relationship and trust with their churches. China is coming from a Communist background and there has been some mistrust of Christianity ... They wanted to understand who is a Christian ... Can he be trusted?" the Rev. Canon George Bagamuhunda, the Provincial Secretary of the (Anglican) Church of Uganda told ENInews on 20 May from Kampala as the Chinese delegation of ten officials left the country.

Wang Zuo'an, the religious affairs minister who led the team, said they hoped to establish a relationship between African and Chinese churches. They also wanted to see how the churches relate with the state in the two countries. Archbishop John Chew of Singapore coordinated the visit, which was organized by the primates of the Global South Anglican Communion. The communion includes South America, Africa and Asia.

"The Africa visit can be described as confidence-building for the delegation. I can say the suspicion has been reduced to a second level," said Bagamuhunda. According to him, the Chinese officials said Christians in China were not seen as a problem and were allowed the freedom to exercise their faith, just like any other religious group in the country.

However, media reports indicate growing tensions between the Chinese authorities and increasingly assertive Christian groups whose memberships are growing rapidly. For example, in May, Chinese Catholics elected Huang Bingzhang, 43, as the new bishop of Shantou. The Vatican-appointed bishop of Shantou, 81-year-old Zhuang Jianjian, has never been recognised by China and has been under house arrest since before Easter over a month ago.

In China, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism are recognized by the state and the practice of any other faith is considered illegal. Religious organizations in China are required to register with one of five state-sanctioned patriotic religious associations, each of which is supervised by SARA.

According to Chinese officials, there are 23 million registered Protestants and 6 million Roman Catholics (out of a population of 1.3 billion) worshipping in state-sanctioned churches. Millions more are believed to worship outside the state churches and many claim government harassment.

In Nairobi, the Rev. Rosemary Mbogo, the Provincial Secretary of the Anglican Church of Kenya said they had urged the officials to stress the African churches desire to see Christians in China treated better. "We presented the scenario," said Mbogo. "Whether it (the visit) will result in better treatment, we can't say now." China has opened up domestic trade and wants to increase investment in Africa in many areas, said Mbogo.

Most of the Bibles used by Christians in Africa, according to the leaders, are printed in China, a reason why the delegation visited the Bible societies in the two countries. "Three quarters of the Bibles in Kenya are printed in China," noted Mbogo.

It is estimated that one-quarter of all the Bibles in the world are printed in China. Over 26 million Bibles have been exported to some 60 countries in such languages as English, French, Spanish and Braille. In November 2010, Amity Press, the officially sanctioned Bible publisher in China, said it had printed the 80 millionth Bible.