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Immigration and
Refugee Board of Canada

Commission de l'immigration
et du statut de réfugié du Canada

China: The Church of Almighty God (Quannengshen), also known as "Eastern Lightning," including its leaders, location and activities attributed to it; treatment of members by authorities (March 2013-September 2014) [CHN104965.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

For information on the Church of Almighty God, and its activities prior to March 2013, refer to Response to Information Request CHN104304.

For information on the beliefs of the Church of Almighty God and the religious texts used by its members, refer to Response to Information Request CHN104970.

1. Members and Leaders

According to several sources, members of the Church of Almighty God in China are estimated to number in the millions (BBC 13 Aug. 2014; Dui Hua 10 July 2014; *The Guardian* 18 Aug. 2014). However, CNN states that estimates of its membership range from hundreds of thousands to a million members (CNN 8 June 2014).

In a statement sent to CNN, members of the Church of Almighty God who operate the church's English-language website said that "'our church doesn't exactly have a spokesperson because nobody can fully represent' the group" (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report that Zhao Weishan is the founder of the Church of Almighty God (Xinhua 20 Aug. 2014; *The Guardian* 18 Aug. 2014; CNN 8 June 2014). According to the Chinese state news agency Xinhua, Zhao Weishan is also known as Xu Wenshan (Xinhua 20 Aug. 2014). Zhao has reportedly been living in the United States for over ten years (ibid.; *The Guardian* 18 Aug. 2014; CNN 8 June 2014). Xinhua specifies that Zhao Weishan fled to the United States in September 2000 along with his wife Yang Xiangbin, who the Church of Almighty God claims is a female incarnation of Jesus Christ (20 Aug. 2014). Two sources refer to this female incarnation of Christ as "Lightning Deng" (*The Guardian* 18 Aug. 2014; CNN 8 June 2014).

2. Activities Attributed to the Church of Almighty God

According to the BBC, the Church shows "outright hostility" towards the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (13 Aug. 2014). Sources report that the Church calls on its members to fight against the CCP (*The Guardian* 18 Aug. 2014; *The New York Times* 11 June 2014; CNN 8 June 2014).

According to the *New York Times*, "the group is not known for violence" (11 June 2014). However, sources report that members of the group have been accused of committing violent acts, including murders (Xinhua 20 Aug. 2014; BBC 13 Aug. 2014; CNN 8 June 2014). In an interview with the BBC, a church member's relative said that "[t]he cult is anti-family ... [i]t throw[s] away family relationships and encourage each other to do the same" (quoted in BBC 13 Aug. 2014). He added that "[w]hoever is more resolute in rejecting their family is given a higher rank" (ibid.). Similarly, an Agence France-Presse (AFP) article indicates that according to Chinese state media, the church "brainwashed its members and encourage them to isolate themselves from family and friends" (19 Aug. 2014). A Xinhua article indicates that in "many" of the "numerous suicides and murders" that the church's members have reportedly been responsible for, the victims were a family member of the perpetrator (Xinhua 20 Aug. 2014).

According to Xinhua, the Church of Almighty God has been "illegally" collecting money (ibid.). The BBC wrote that the church's members have "persuade[d] new members to hand over money in exchange for salvation" (13 Aug. 2014).

2.1 Recruitment

Some sources report that the group is known for its "aggressive" recruitment methods (BBC 13 Aug. 2014; *SCMP* 5 Aug. 2013; CNN 8 June 2014). According to the Hong Kong-based daily newspaper *The South China Morning Post* (*SCMP*), the group has allegedly "kidnapped," "tortured" and "brainwashed" people in order to convert them (5 Aug. 2013). Similarly, the Associated Press (AP) reports that the group is accused of "using threats, violence and other illegal measures" to recruit members (11 June 2014). The BBC likewise states that the group has been accused of using kidnapping and intimidation to recruit members, as well as to target individuals who are in vulnerable situations (13 Aug. 2014).

3. Treatment by Authorities

3.1 Legal Status

Sources note that the Church of Almighty God is among 14 "evil cults" banned by Chinese authorities (*The Guardian* 18 Aug. 2014; Xinhua 8 Aug. 2014; ChinaAid 19 June 2014). Xinhua specifies that "[a]ccording to Chinese law, a cult is an illegal organization that tries to control people by deifying the sect leader, deludes members under the guise of religion, and engages in activities that harm society" (11 Oct. 2014). Article 300 of the Criminal Law of China establishes penalties for the "use" of organizations considered as "sects":

Whoever forms or uses superstitious sects or secret societies or weird religious organizations or uses superstition to undermine the implementation of the laws and administrative rules and regulations of the State shall be sentenced to fixed-term imprisonment of not less than three years but not more than seven years; if the circumstances are especially serious, he shall be sentenced to fixed-term imprisonment of not less than seven years. (China 1979, Art. 300)

The Dui Hua foundation, an NGO based in San Francisco that monitors and advocates for the rights of detainees in China, notably those detained on religious and political grounds (Dui Hua n.d.), also refers to Article 300, stating that

[u]nder Article 300 of the Criminal Law, individuals who participate in cult organizations may be charged with "organizing/using a cult to undermine implementation of the law" and face prison sentences of 3-7 years. According to a joint interpretation issued by the Supreme People's Court and Supreme People's Procuratorate in 1999, cult crimes can be applied when one "resists group bans by relevant departments, resumes banned groups, establishes other sects, or continues [illegal] activities." (Dui Hua 10 July 2014)

According to the *Guardian*, authorities "have made repeated attempts to eradicate" the Church of Almighty God (18 Aug. 2014). The BBC reports that members of the Church of Almighty God have accused authorities of "persecution" (13 Aug. 2014). Human rights observers have criticized certain government actions against the Church of Almighty God (*The Guardian* 18 Aug. 2014; *The New York Times* 11 June 2014). *The Guardian* reports that according to a Hong Kong-based researcher for Human Rights Watch, the government has "gone after members of Eastern Lightning for organising activities that [are not] against the law" (18 Aug. 2014). Likewise, the *New York Times* quotes a defence lawyer as saying that actions by authorities against the group were politically motivated and that they were an "effort to eradicate an entire group of believers, not just the ones who committed crimes" (11 June 2014).

The Information Centre on Asylum and Migration of the German government's Federal Office for Migration and Asylum (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, BAMF) states that "[o]ne reason why the authorities designate the sect as an "evil cult" [...] is that it rejects the state and the [Communist] party," adding that "the Communist Party regards every group which organises itself outside the state structures as a potential threat to its power" (BAMF 2 Jan. 2013). Reuters similarly states that "the party brooks no challenge to its rule and is obsessed with social stability," adding that "[i]t has cracked down on cults, which have multiplied across the country in recent years" (Reuters 19 Aug. 2014).

3.2 Post- December 2012 Arrests

According to sources, over 1,300 members of the group throughout the country were arrested in connection to apocalyptic statements made by the group in December 2012 (US 10 Oct. 2013, 94; Dui Hua 29 Aug. 2013). Sources report that people were detained in 16 provinces (ibid.; US 10 Oct. 2013, 94). According to the Dui Hua foundation, 800 of these arrests were made in the provinces of Qinghai and Guizhou (Dui Hua 29 Aug. 2013). The US Department of State's *Religious Freedom Report for 2012* notes that authorities also "launched a media campaign against [members of the Church of Almighty God] for rumor mongering and swindling people" (US 20 May 2013, 12).

For further details on events surrounding the Church of Almighty God in December 2012 and reactions by the authorities, refer to Response to Information Request CHN104304.

The Dui Hua foundation notes that, according to a June 2014 Xinhua news report, police in Ningxia [autonomous region] "had detained more than 1,000 members of Almighty God since [the December 2012 events] and that Liaoning police had arrested 113 leading members since 2013" (Dui Hua 10 July 2014). The Dui Hua foundation added that

[w]ith the exception of Henan Province, which publicizes most of its court verdicts online, most jurisdictions do not report the names of people detained in Almighty God cases. That said, according to *Southern Weekly* [a Chinese newspaper based in Guangzhou], of the 161 Almighty God verdicts published online nationwide, 109 were in Henan and 134 involved violations of Article 300. Among the 134 Article 300 cases, which involved 335 defendants, the lengthiest sentence was eight years' imprisonment, handed down to only one defendant. Most defendants were sentenced to three years' imprisonment or above, and one third of defendants received suspended sentences. Defense lawyers participated in only one third of these 134 criminal cases. (ibid.)

3.3 Imprisonment of Lai Yiwa

Sources report on the specific case of Lai Yiwa, a member of the Church of Almighty God in Guangdong province who was sentenced to seven years in prison in April 2013 for distributing publications relating to the group (HRWF 1 July 2014; US 10 Oct. 2013, 94; Dui Hua 29 Aug. 2013). The US Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) identifies Lai as a "political prisoner" (US n.d.). The international NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) lists Lai in its *Freedom of Religion or Belief & Blasphemy Prisoners List World Report 2014* (HRWF 1 July 2014). The political prisoner database operated by the CECC specifies that Lai was charged with "using a cult organization to undermine implementation of the law," under Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Law (US n.d.). Sources indicate that he is held in Beijiang prison in the city of Shaoguan (Dui Hua 29 Aug. 2013; US n.d.). According to Dui Hua, "Lai is the only individual known to have been convicted in Guangdong in connection with [events in December 2012]" (Dui Hua 29 Aug. 2013).

3.4 May 2014 Killing in McDonald's and Reaction by Authorities

Multiple sources report that the slaying of a woman in late May 2014 in Macdonald's restaurant in the city of Zhaoyuan, in Shandong province, was linked to members of the Church of Almighty God (*The Guardian* 18 Aug. 2014; AP 11 June 2014; CNN 8 June 2014). The woman was reportedly publicly beaten to death after refusing to provide her phone number to six members of the group (ibid.; ChinaAid 19 June 2014; AP 11 June 2014). The incident was caught on video and broadcasted nationwide (Reuters 19 Aug. 2014; BBC 13 Aug. 2014; CNN 8 June 2014). Sources indicate the attack caused "shock" (CNN 8 June 2014), "public outrage" (BBC 13 Aug. 2014) and "a national outcry" (Reuters 19 Aug. 2014) in the country. According to two sources, the Church of Almighty God accused the authorities of linking the murder to the group (*The Guardian* 18 Aug. 2014; CNN 8 June 2014).

Sources report that authorities launched a crackdown on cults following the killing (Reuters 19 Aug. 2014; *The Guardian* 18 Aug. 2014; AP 11 June 2014). According to sources, authorities announced in June 2014 that over 1,500 cult members had been detained (*The Guardian* 18 Aug. 2014; *The New York Times* 11 June 2014; AP 11 June 2014). Sources reported that it was also announced that 59 individuals had been sentenced for up to four years imprisonment under charges of "using a cult [organisation] to undermine enforcement of the law" (AP 11 June 2014; *The New York Times* 11 June 2014). However, some of the arrests reportedly went back to two years and also involved alleged members of another group known as the Disciples

Sect (ibid.; AP 11 June 2014). AP stated that "[r]eports of the detentions appeared to be an effort to reassure the public following outrage over violence and other illegal activity blamed on cult adherents" (ibid.).

In August 2014, Chinese authorities announced that "nearly 1,000" alleged members of the Church of Almighty God have been arrested since June 2014 (AFP 19 Aug. 2014; Xinhua 19 Aug. 2014; Reuters 19 Aug. 2014). According to Xinhua, those arrested were "allegedly involved in more than 500 [separate] cases" (19 Aug. 2014). AFP noted that the arrests included "high-level organizers and backbone members" and that those arrested reportedly came from six different provinces (AFP 19 Aug. 2014). According to Reuters, "China has sentenced dozens of followers" of the Church of Almighty God since the killing in the McDonald's restaurant (Reuters 19 Aug. 2014).

The ChinaAid Association, an NGO that monitors and promotes religious freedom in China (ChinaAid 19 Feb. 2012), reported that there were concerns among Chinese Christians "that the government will escalate their persecution of house churches through the front of combating cult organizations" (ibid. 19 June 2014). The *New York Times* likewise reports that "some Chinese religious leaders worry that campaigns against heterodox groups will spill over and affect congregations that are doctrinally mainstream but unsanctioned by the Communist Party, which seeks to manage all religious activity" (11 June 2014).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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