

China Detains Buddhist Leader

Americans Ejected From Temple Site

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Washington Post Foreign Service

Thursday, August 19, 2004; Page A22

BEIJING, Aug. 18 -- Chinese authorities have detained a prominent, U.S.-based Buddhist leader in connection with his plans to reopen an ancient temple complex in Inner Mongolia province and have forced dozens of his American followers to leave the region, local officials said Wednesday.

The U.S. Embassy here said it has requested an explanation from the Chinese government and plans to protest the treatment of the Americans, several of whom accused police of physically removing them from the temple and seizing their property.

The embassy also urged the Chinese government to respect the rights of the detained spiritual leader, Yu Tianjian, 53, a Chinese citizen who holds a U.S. green card and has been the abbot of the Dari Rulai Temple in Los Angeles for nearly five years. His students consider him a "living Buddha," or an enlightened teacher who has been reincarnated, and the "dharma king," or leader, of a branch of Buddhism with perhaps millions of adherents worldwide.

Yu's detention is the latest sign of an official crackdown on unauthorized religion in China that appears to have intensified in recent months. Eight Roman Catholic priests were arrested in a raid last week in Hebei province, a U.S.-based rights group said Wednesday, and another U.S.-based rights group reported the conviction of three underground Protestant leaders in Henan province this month on charges of "providing state intelligence" to overseas organizations.

Yu, also known as Dechan Jueren, was detained Aug. 11 after being called to a meeting by officials in Kulun county, where his organization, the Buddhist Foundation of America, had spent the past year and more than \$3 million renovating an 800-year-old temple, said one of his aides, Dan Kendall.

Kendall said officials told Yu's students that he had been charged with "promoting superstition." A government official in Kulun reached by telephone confirmed that Yu had been detained for "some type of religious activity," but referred questions to local police, who would not comment on what one officer described as a "secret operation."

Yu's arrest occurred three days before the planned reopening of the Xingyuan temple complex in Kulun, located about 375 miles northeast of Beijing. Scores of Tibetan Buddhist monks had traveled to Kulun for the celebration, and more than 100 Buddhist adherents from the United States, Canada and Japan -- many of whom had donated money to help restore the facility -- were on their way.

But after Yu's detention, local authorities cut power and water service to the temple, military police forced about 70 monks into buses and drove them away, and other officers

dragged Kendall and six of Yu's other American students out of the complex, Kendall said. Police then hauled away two truckloads of valuable statues, religious artifacts and other personal property from the temple, he said.

The U.S. Embassy said police interrogated one American citizen at a local hotel, then released the person.

Kendall said the raid was a surprise because Yu had received government permission to renovate the temple and hold the celebration. "They welcomed us up there with open arms, but I guess they changed their minds," he said. "They took our money and kicked us out."

The foreigners who had traveled to China for the festival -- advertised on the Internet as "an unprecedented gathering of five dharma kings" and hundreds of other spiritual leaders and teachers -- were stopped at roadblocks in the region and barred from even seeing the temple.

"We paid thousands of dollars to come here, and many of us have donated a lot of money to this temple to be opened," said one traveler, Marcia Small, of the Toronto area. "We're not getting what we paid for."

A local religious affairs official, who spoke on condition he be identified only by his surname, Li, declined to comment on Yu's status and said the government was responsible only for ensuring the safety of the visitors and sending them home. "The activities are over," he said. "The guests were relatively satisfied."