

Chinese bishop's burial ends government, church impasse

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TANGSHAN, CHINA -- Bishop Paul Liu Jinghe was buried in Tangshan diocese on Christmas Even, ending a tense standoff between government authorities and the local church.

Disagreement over his final resting place had escalated since the bishop's death, aged 92, Dec. 11. He had demanded burial at Lulong Cemetery, where the diocese's first bishop, Ernst Guerts, was interred in 1940.

The site became a church cemetery after several priests and nuns were buried there but it was wrecked during the political turmoil of the 1950s, shortly after the communists took power.

Since then, it has been used as farmland, and in 1993 ? with the government?s permission ? Liu reburied Geurts and other clergy in a corner of the over 6 acre site.

The late bishop had demanded the return of the site several times during his lifetime.

Bishop Peter Fang Jingping told ucanews.com that the government has effectively ended the dispute by purchasing a new 0.33 hectare plot at Beigang village in Qianxi county to replace the former cemetery. The appeased parishioners agreed to bury Liu there.

Fang denied rumors that the government has also paid compensation of 1.5 million yuan (US\$247,000) to the diocese.

The diocese in Hebei province had announced on Dec. 17 that it would not bury Liu unless the government returned the disputed land.

In response, officials came to the cathedral the next day and took clergy away to offices of the State Administration for Religious Affairs. The mobile phones of all priests and nuns in Tangshan were also monitored.

After days of negotiation, government negotiators warned the diocese that discussions would be closed if they did not accept the alternative plot in Beigang, according to a Church source who asked not to be named.

?The provincial government did not want to get involved in a standoff,? said the source. ?The officials of Tangshan also felt that they had little room to maneuver because Lulong county, belonging to neighboring Qinhuangdao city, was not under their administration,? he added.

?It is Christmas and the standoff has lingered for days, so the most important thing was to bury the bishop first.?

The agreement was accepted by the local clergy but a small group of laypeople criticized it. One churchgoer, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said he could understand it was a difficult decision for the clergy and ?a partial win? for the Church as the government made a significant concession.

?However, we laypeople also helped in the fight for the property. The clergy should have let us know before closing the deal with the government. We think they were too easy in accepting the offer,? he said.

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