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China blocks Christians from going to Africa event

BEIJING

BY SHARON LAFRANIERE

More than 100 Chinese Christians seeking to attend an international evangelical conference in South Africa have been barred from leaving the country, some in the group said, because their churches are not sanctioned by the state.

Organizers say that more than 4,000 Christians from around the world will discuss faith, poverty, H.I.V./AIDS and other issues at the nine-day conference, which was to begin Saturday in Cape Town. But members of the Chinese delegation said that they could get no farther than the passport control at international airports in China before officials confiscated their documents.

"They said this is an illegal conference, and they sent me home," said Liu Guan, 36, a Protestant evangelical leader who tried to fly out of Capital International Airport in Beijing last Sunday. "They said I cannot go anywhere."

China's policy toward believers is more relaxed now than a decade ago. Although only government-sanctioned churches are considered legal, and believers regularly complain of government harassment, in certain regions unregistered or so-called "house" churches are allowed to operate without much interference.

But the Chinese authorities say that the Cape Town organizers failed to honor China's policy of domestic control over religious activities. In a statement Friday, Ma Zhaoxu, spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said they failed to formally invite the legal representatives of China's Christians. In-

stead, he said, they "secretly extended multiple invitations to Christians who privately set up meeting points."

"This action publicly challenges the principle of independent, autonomous, domestically organized religious associations, and therefore represents a rude interference in Chinese religious affairs," his statement said.

Conference officials have protested. In a statement, Doug Birdsall, the executive chairman, said that China's official Christian representatives were invited but turned down the invitation. The Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the China Christian Council — which make up the only state-sanctioned Protestant church in China — was also included in the process of selecting participants, he said.

Michael Cassidy, an evangelical Christian and founder of a group called African Enterprise, complained in a letter Thursday to the Chinese ambassador in South Africa that the conference was purely a spiritual gathering. China's action is being greeted with "deep concern, even dismay," he wrote.

There is precedent. In accordance with China's policy against foreign oversight of religion, the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, which officially represents Chinese Catholics, does not recognize the authority of the pope. Ignoring that, Pope Benedict XVI invited four Chinese bishops to attend the Synod of Bishops in 2005. The government refused permission, according to news reports.

Mr. Liu said the Chinese authorities began contacting roughly 200 Protestants who had been invited to the conference three months ago, advising them not to attend.