



NEWS REPORT

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Unofficial Yantai Bishop Gao confirmed dead

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Rome (AsiaNews) - Mgr John Gao Kexian, unofficial Bishop of Yantai died in the evening of January 24 2005 in a hospital in the city of Bingzhou (Shandong). He had been in prison for the previous five years.

His body was cremated and buried the day following his death in the presence of police officers. No relative or faithful were allowed to attend the event. The Bishop died without any religious comforts and his body was not blessed.

Because of the news blackout surrounding his case and concerns about his health rumours about his death had already appeared in September 2004. The Vatican, which had received the news from a nun, had itself announced his passing on September 11, 2004. It is very likely that she had learnt about the Bishop's rapidly failing health and had alerted the outside world.

This time, Bishop Gao's death was confirmed by several sources in Shandong province. Relatives who wanted to visit him in hospital in Bingzhou found that he was already dead.

Police refused an autopsy and speedily proceeded to bury him.

The Bishops' remains now lie in a cemetery on the outskirts of Gaomiaoli village, near Bingzhou.

Bishop Gao was 81-year-old. As a seminary student he had already spent many years in a forced labour camp in Longzhen (Heilongjiang province). He was ordained in July 1983 and became

bishop in October 1992. Whilst on a pastoral visit to some families the police arrested him and he has not been heard ever since.

When news first came about his death AsiaNews wondered what the probable cause was: torture, hardship, old age?

Shandong authorities report that he died of illness but since the police took the body away and prevented any autopsy from being performed, it is still a legitimate question to ask what the cause Bishop Gao's death was.

The issue is important because Chinese authorities still detain incommunicado two other bishops: James Su Zhimin, Ordinary Bishop of Baoding (Hebei province) and Mgr Francis An Shuxin, his auxiliary. They, too, were abducted by the police in 1997 and 1996 respectively.

Bishop Su was seen last November in a hospital in Baoding, but was disappeared thereafter.