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**U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Sierra Leone**

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SIERRA LEONE

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government respects this right in practice.

Reliable data on the exact numbers of those who practice major religions is not available. However, most sources estimate that the population is 60 percent Muslim, 30 percent Christian, and 10 percent practitioners of traditional indigenous religions.

Historically, most Muslims have been concentrated in the northern areas of the country, and Christians were located in the south. However, the ongoing civil war has resulted in movement by major segments of the population.

According to sources, many syncretistic practices exist, with up to 20 percent of the population practicing a mixture of Muslim and traditional indigenous practices or Christian and traditional indigenous practices.

The Government permits religious instruction in public schools. Students are allowed to choose whether they attend either Muslim or Christian oriented classes.

The Government has not taken any specific steps to promote interfaith understanding.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

The Revolutionary United Front and the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (RUF/AFRC) insurgent forces targeted religious leaders for attack, including Christians and Muslims, both because of their position in the religious community and their support for the Government. During the January 1999 RUF/AFRC invasion, which occurred during Ramadan, the Freetown population was terrorized

and virtually deprived of religious freedom. Muslims who were found praying in mosques were forced to drink alcoholic beverages, and some of those who refused to partake were beaten. Others reportedly were shot and killed. Three churches and two mosques were set on fire and burned down in Freetown during the January attack.

Rebel forces have targeted Roman Catholic priests and nuns in particular, largely on the assumption that the Church would pay ransom for their return. Another reason is that the rebels saw the use of the Church's radio network by troops of the Economic Organization (of West African States) Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) during the January RUF/AFRC invasion as Church support for the Government.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

There are amicable relations between the various religious communities, and interfaith marriage is common. The Inter-Religious Council (IRC), composed of Christian and Muslim leaders, plays a vital role in civil society and actively participates in effort to further the peace process. The IRC has criticized the use of force and atrocities committed by the RUF/AFRC, has endorsed reconciliation and peace talks, and facilitates rehabilitation of the victims affected by the war, including former child soldiers.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the overall context of the promotion of human rights.

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