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COTE D'IVOIRE 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides freedom of religious opinion to all consistent with law and order and prohibits religious discrimination in employment. It forbids speech that encourages religious hatred. The government organized and funded Hajj pilgrimages for Muslims but, unlike previous years, did not provide a similar benefit for adherents of other faiths. The government continued to include Muslim and Catholic leaders in political reconciliation efforts.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

The Ambassador and U.S. embassy representatives met with religious leaders and groups throughout the year to discuss the role they can play in maintaining a climate of tolerance in the run-up to the 2015 presidential elections. Embassy representatives also discussed the importance of religious tolerance with political figures in the government and the opposition. During the year, a Voice of America interactive radio program continued to feature discussion and debate of religious issues on the national Islamic radio station. In October an embassy-sponsored concert promoting tolerance that featured musical groups of different faiths and attracted thousands of attendees in Abidjan.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 22.8 million, of which 39 percent is Muslim, 33 percent Christian, and 12 percent adheres to indigenous religious beliefs (July 2014 estimate). Many Christians and Muslims also adhere to some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs.

Traditionally, the north is associated with Islam and the south with Christianity, although adherents of both religious groups live throughout the country.

Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Harrists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Southern Baptists, Copts, adherents of the Celestial Church of Christ, and members of the Assemblies of God. Muslim groups include Sunni, Shia, and Ahmadi. Other religious groups include

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Buddhists, Bahais, Rastafarians, followers of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and Bossonists, who follow traditions of the Akan ethnic group.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates a secular state which respects all beliefs and treats all individuals equally under the law, regardless of religion. It prohibits religious discrimination in public and private employment and provides for freedom of conscience and religious opinion consistent with the law, the rights of others, national security, and public order. It prohibits “propaganda” that encourages religious hatred. It recognizes the right of political asylum in the country for individuals persecuted for religious reasons.

The Ministry of Interior’s Department of Faith-Based Organizations is charged with promoting dialogue among religious groups and between the government and religious groups, providing administrative support to groups trying to become established, monitoring religious activities, and managing state-sponsored religious pilgrimages and registration of new religious groups.

The law requires all religious groups to register with the government. Groups must submit an application to the Department of Faith-Based Organizations. The application must include the group’s bylaws, names of the founding members and board members, date of founding, and general assembly minutes. The department investigates the organization with the aim of ensuring that the group has no members or purpose it deems to be politically subversive. There are no penalties prescribed for groups that do not register or benefits for those that do.

Government Practices

The government continued to fund and organize Hajj pilgrimages for Muslims but, unlike previous years, failed to allocate a budget during the year for Christian pilgrimages to Israel, the Occupied Territories, and Lourdes, France.

The government provided access to state-run television and radio for religious programming to religious groups that requested it.

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The government included prominent Muslim and Catholic religious leaders in reconciliation efforts. The country's widely acknowledged Muslim leader, Sheikh Boikary Fofana, and Catholic Archbishop Paul-Simeon Ahouana, along with other religious leaders, continued to serve as active members of the Dialogue, Truth, and Reconciliation Commission until completion of its mandate in September. The government also appointed two religious leaders – Father Martial Boni Boni and Imam Ousmane Diakite – to the Independent Electoral Commission, the body charged with organizing and overseeing national elections.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador and U.S. embassy representatives met regularly with local religious, civil society, and political leaders to discuss religious freedom and tolerance generally and the role religious groups can play in helping to maintain a climate of tolerance in the run-up to the 2015 presidential elections.

Under an embassy-facilitated agreement between Voice of America (VOA) and Al-Bayane Radio, VOA's French-language *Dialogue des Religions* (*Dialogue of the Religions*) continued to reach millions of listeners across the country with its weekly broadcast on the Islamic radio station. *Dialogue des Religions* is an interactive program featuring host and guests – often religious scholars or journalists – who discussed religious issues in the news and answered listeners' questions on various facets of religion.

On October 18, the embassy commemorated Daniel Pearl World Music Days by hosting a concert featuring musical groups of different faiths, including Islam and Christianity. The concert, attended by approximately 4,000 people, highlighted tolerance, peace, and reconciliation, while strengthening U.S. engagement with Ivoirians from across the religious spectrum.