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Russia**International Religious Freedom Report 2004**

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, in some cases the authorities imposed restrictions on some groups. Although the Constitution provides for the equality of all religions before the law and the separation of church and state, the Government did not always respect these provisions.

Conditions deteriorated somewhat for minority religious faiths although government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion for most of the population. Some federal agencies and many local authorities continued to restrict the rights of various religious minorities. Legal obstacles to registration under a complex 1997 law "On Freedom of Conscience and Associations," which seriously disadvantages religious groups new to the country, and which had eased somewhat in the period covered by the last report, were cited as the basis for banning Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow and upheld in the second appeal of the case. There were indications that the security services increasingly treated the leadership of some minority religious groups as security threats.

Religious matters are not a source of societal hostility for most citizens, although many citizens firmly believe that at least nominal adherence to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is at the heart of what it means to be Russian. Popular attitudes toward traditionally Muslim ethnic groups are negative in many regions, and there are manifestations of anti-Semitism as well as societal hostility toward Roman Catholics and newer, non-Orthodox religions. Instances of religiously motivated violence continue, although it often is difficult to determine whether xenophobia, religion, or ethnic prejudices were the primary motivation behind violent attacks. Conservative activists claiming ties to the ROC disseminated negative publications and staged demonstrations throughout the country against Roman Catholics, Protestants, members of Jehovah's Witnesses, and religions new to the country. Leaders in the ROC have stated publicly their opposition to the presence of Roman Catholics, Protestants, and newer religions.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Government continued to engage the Government, a number of religious groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and others in a steady dialogue on religious freedom. The Embassy and consulates have worked with NGOs to encourage the development of programs designed to sensitize officials to recognize discrimination, prejudice, and crimes motivated by ethnic or religious intolerance. The Embassy maintains a broad range of contacts in the religious and NGO community via frequent communication and meetings. Consular officers routinely investigate criminal, customs, and immigration cases involving foreign citizens to determine whether they involve possible violations of religious freedom, and also raise the issue of visas for religious workers with the Passport and Visa Unit in the Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD) and the Foreign Ministry (MFA). The U.S. Ambassador addressed religious freedom in public addresses and consultations with government officials. He also attended events on major religious holidays and often met with a range of religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 6,592,769 square miles, and its population is approximately 144 million. There are no reliable statistics that break down the population by denomination. Available information suggests slightly more than half of the inhabitants consider themselves Russian Orthodox Christians, although the vast majority are not regular churchgoers. There are an estimated 14 to 20 million Muslims, constituting approximately 14 percent of the population

and forming the largest religious minority. Muslims live predominantly in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, the North Caucasus, and the Volga region. By most estimates, Protestants constitute the third largest group of believers. An estimated 600,000 to 1 million Jews remain in the country (0.5 percent of the total population) following large-scale emigration over the last 2 decades; approximately 80 percent live in Moscow or St. Petersburg. The so-called Jewish Autonomous Oblast, located in the Far East, has between 5,000 and 7,000 Jews. Buddhism is traditional to three regions: Buryatiya, Tuva, and Kalmykiya. In some areas, such as Yakutia and Chukotka, pantheistic and nature-based religions are practiced independently or alongside majority religions.

According to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), there were 21,664 registered religious organizations as of January 1. The figures show an increase of approximately 1,000 registered organizations since 2002 and more than 5,000 since 1997. The MOJ recorded the number of registered religious groups as follows: Russian Orthodox Church—11,525 groups, Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church—41, Russian Orthodox Church Abroad—45, True Orthodox Church—24, Russian Orthodox Free Church—16, Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kiev Patriarchate)—11, Old Believers—284 (divided among 4 groups), Roman Catholic—248, Greek Catholic—5, Armenian Apostolic—60, Muslim—3,537, Buddhist—192, Jewish—267 (divided among Orthodox and Reform groups), Baptist—979, Pentecostal—1,467, Seventh-day Adventist—646, other evangelical and charismatic groups—134, Lutheran—219 (divided among 4 groups), Apostolic—81, Methodist—105, Reformist—5, Presbyterian—176, Anglican—1, Jehovah's Witnesses—386, Mennonite—9, Salvation Army—32, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)—50, Unification Church—9, Church of the "Sovereign" Icon of the Mother of God—27, Molokane—28, Dukhobor—1, Church of the Last Covenant—11, Church of Christ—26, non-denominational Christian—24, Scientologist—2, Hindu—1, Krishna—80, Baha'i—20, Tantric—2, Taoist—6, Assyrian—2, Sikh—1, Shamanist—14, Karaite—1, Zoroastrian—1, Spiritual Unity (Tolstoyan)—1, Living Ethic (Rerikhian)—1, pagan—11, other confessions—216.

The number of registered religious organizations does not reflect the entire demography of religious believers. For example, due to legal restrictions, poor administrative procedures on the part of some local authorities, or disputes between religious organizations, an unknown number of groups have been unable to register or reregister. An estimated 500 (official estimate) to more than 9,000 (Council of Muftis estimate) Muslim organizations remain unregistered; some reportedly are defunct, but many, according to the Council of Muftis, have concluded that they did not require legal status and have postponed applying for financial reasons. Registration figures probably also underestimate the number of Pentecostals. The Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith estimates that there are 1,600 Pentecostal churches, 62 regional associations, and about 300,000 believers. The official number of registered Pentecostal organizations as of January 1 was 1,467. The difference in numbers can be explained by the fact that many Pentecostal churches remain unregistered.

Some religious groups have registered as social organizations because they were unable to register as religious organizations. The Unification Church reports that the drop in registered organizations from 17 during the previous reporting period, to 10 the period covered by this report, was due to local authorities hindering the Church's attempt to reregister its local organizations. As of January 1, there were no Quaker organizations listed by the MOJ, but the groups may have been categorized under "other faiths," of which there were 216 organizations. The Moscow Monthly Friends' Meeting (Quakers) is an officially registered Quakers' organization.

In practice, only a small minority of citizens identify strongly with any religion. Many who identify themselves as members of a faith participate in religious life only rarely, or not at all.

A large number of foreign missionaries operate in the country, many from Protestant denominations.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, in some cases the authorities imposed restrictions on some groups. The Constitution also provides for the equality of all religions before the law and the separation of church and state; however, the Government did not always respect this provision.

The law on freedom of religion was adopted in 1990 by the country's Supreme Court and remained the same until a new law was adopted in 1997. The 1990 law declared all religions equal before the law, prohibited government interference in religion, and established simple registration procedures for religious groups. Registration of religious groups was not required, but groups could obtain a number of advantages by registering, such as the ability to establish official places of worship or benefit from tax exemptions. The 1990 law helped facilitate a revival of religious activity. In 1997, a supplemental law on religion was passed: The Law on Freedom of Conscience. Although the 1997 law does not recognize a state religion, its preamble identifies Russian Orthodoxy, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism as "traditional religions" and recognizes the "special contribution of Orthodoxy to the history of Russia and to the establishment and development of Russia's spirituality and culture."

Neither the Constitution nor the 1997 law accords explicit privileges or advantages to "traditional religions;" however, many politicians and public figures argue for closer cooperation with them, above all with the ROC's Moscow Patriarchate. The ROC has entered into a number of agreements, some formal, others informal, with government ministries on such matters as guidelines for public education, religious training for military personnel, and law enforcement and customs decisions, giving the ROC special access to institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, the police, the Federal Security Service (FSB), and the army.

Many government officials and citizens, equate Russian Orthodoxy with nationhood. This belief appears to have manifested itself in a church-state relationship. For example, the ROC has made special arrangements with government agencies to conduct religious education and to provide spiritual counseling. These include agreements with the Ministries of Education, Defense, Health, Interior, and other bodies, such as Emergency Situations, Tax, Federal Border Service, and Main Department of Cossack Forces under the President. The details of these agreements are far from transparent, but available information indicates that the ROC appears to receive more favorable treatment than other denominations. Public statements by some government officials and anecdotal evidence from religious minorities suggest that the ROC, increasingly since 1999, has enjoyed a status that approaches official. Election campaign teams often include members of the Russian Orthodox clergy. The clergy frequently plays a special role at official events at both the local and national level. For example, in early 2002, the director of the FSB received Patriarch Aleksiy at the Service's Lubyanka headquarters, where the prelate blessed a church that had been restored. Nonetheless, policymakers remain divided on the State's proper relationship with the ROC and other churches.

The Duma elected in December 2003 contains several staunchly pro-ROC members, although this has not so far been reflected in the legislation taken up by the Duma leadership. The Rodina faction and single-mandate deputies representing the People's Party have already declared their positions as ROC lobbyists. Aleksandr Chuyev, Chairman of the Duma Committee on Public Associations and Religious Organizations Affairs, announced in February that an inter-factional deputies' group, "In Support of Traditional Spiritual and Ethical values of Russia," was to be formed in the State Duma. According to Chuyev, 30 deputies have already expressed their will to join the association. Oleg Yefremov, who was appointed executive secretary of the interfactional group, in an interview emphasized the Duma deputies' extraordinary role in defending traditional values and withstanding various sects. In Yefremov's view, there should be only four traditional religious faiths in the country: Russian Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. No other religions should be allowed. Despite the strength of the ROC lobby in the Duma, no actual legislative moves to strengthen ROC's position have been taken yet.

The President, who has openly spoken of his belief in God, acknowledged Orthodox Easter, Rosh Hashanah, Ramadan, and the Buddhist New Year with greetings to representatives of the ROC, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist communities, respectively. Some of the country's highest-level officials attended the Orthodox Christmas service, celebrated on January 7, a national holiday, at Christ the Savior Cathedral.

The 1997 law ostensibly targeted so-called "totalitarian sects" or dangerous religious "cults." However, the intent of some of the law's sponsors appears to have been to discriminate against members of foreign and less well-known religions by making it difficult for them to establish religious organizations. For example, many officials in law enforcement and the legislative branches speak of the need to protect the "spiritual security" of the country by discouraging the growth of "sects" and "cults," usually understood to include Protestant and newer religious movements. The 1997 law is very complex, with many ambiguous provisions; and it creates

various categories of religious communities with differing levels of legal status and privileges. Most significantly, the law distinguishes between religious "groups" and "organizations." A religious "group" is not registered and consequently does not have the legal status of a juridical person; it may not open a bank account, own property, issue invitations to foreign guests, publish literature, or conduct worship services in prisons and state-owned hospitals and among the armed forces. It does not enjoy tax benefits or the right to proselytize. Individual members of the group may buy property for the group's use, invite personal guests to engage in religious instruction, and import religious material. In this way, groups theoretically are permitted to rent public spaces and hold services; however, in practice members of unregistered groups sometimes encounter significant difficulty in exercising these rights.

The 1997 law provides that a group that has existed for 15 years and has at least 10 citizen members may register as a "local organization." It acquires the status of a juridical person and receives certain legal advantages. A group with three functioning local organizations in different regions may found a "centralized organization," which has the right to establish affiliated local organizations without adhering to the 15-year rule.

Under a 1999 amendment to the law, groups that failed to reregister became subject to legal "liquidation," i.e., deprivation of juridical status. By the deadline for registration, December 31, 2000, an estimated 2,095 religious groups were subject to liquidation, and the MOJ reported that by May 2002, approximately 980 of them had been liquidated. The MOJ asserted that most liquidated organizations were defunct, but religious minorities and NGOs contended that a significant number were active. Complaints of involuntary liquidation have decreased in recent years.

The 1997 law gives officials the authority to ban religious groups. Unlike liquidation, which involves only the loss of an organization's juridical status, a ban prohibits the activities of an entire religious community. The 1997 law required all religious organizations previously registered under the more liberal 1990 law to reregister by December 31, 2000. In practice, this process, which involves simultaneous registration at both the federal and local levels, requires considerable time, effort, and legal expense. International and well-funded domestic religious organizations began to reregister soon after publication of the 1997 regulations; however, some Pentecostal congregations refused to register out of philosophical conviction, and according to spokespersons for the country's two most prominent muftis, some Muslim groups decided that they would not benefit from reregistering.

As with liquidation, complaints of bans against legitimate groups have been decreasing, although a Moscow court judge's decision to uphold on appeal the ban on Jehovah's Witnesses garnered much media coverage and prompted an upswing in anti-Jehovah's Witnesses activity. According to the 2003-2004 Jehovah's Witnesses Country Report for Russia, authorities permitted registration of Jehovah's Witnesses groups in 399 local communities in 72 regions, but problems with registration continued in a number of communities.

Local officials, reportedly sometimes influenced by close relations with local ROC authorities, either refused outright to register groups or created prohibitive obstacles to registration. A lack of specific guidelines to accompany the 1997 law and the shortage of knowledgeable local officials contributed to the problem. There are indications that the Procurator General encouraged local prosecutors to challenge the registration of some nontraditional religious groups.

The Mormons have succeeded in registering more than 45 local religious organizations as of the end of the period covered by the last report. The group had been unable to register a local religious organization in Kazan, Tatarstan, since 1998. The Mormons sued the local Department of Justice in Chelyabinsk after the MOJ rejected 12 applications to register the local Mormon organization in 5 years. The Mormons won at the trial and appellate court levels and were successfully registered.

Many regional Muslim organizations still continue to operate without official registration and, in the Council of Muftis' opinion, registration is not an issue for Muslim organizations. Disagreement between the heads of country's two main Muslim spiritual boards continued and is exploited by the Government for political purposes. Allegations of "Wahhabism" have become pejorative because of persistent allegations that it was to blame for terrorist attacks linked to the war in Chechnya.

In September 2001, the Taganskiy District Court ruled to liquidate the Moscow branch of the Salvation Army and the Moscow City Court upheld the decision in December 2001 according to an amendment to the 1997 law, which requires the MOJ to seek the liquidation of groups who fail to reregister. In February 2002, the Constitutional Court ruled that the Moscow City Court had acted improperly in liquidating the local branch, since it had made repeated and timely attempts to reregister. The MOJ had not reregistered the organization by the end of the reporting period, and as of May, two of the court judgments whereby the applicant branch was stripped of the legal entity status remained in force, despite the ruling of the Constitutional Court. The Presnenskiy District court ruling against the Salvation Army's registration has not yet been upheld, and according to the Salvation Army's Moscow office, it continues to operate based on their documents filed under the old statute. In the preface of the Presnenskiy court's ruling, the Salvation Army is referred to as a "militarized organization." A textbook on religious culture prepared for use in schools repeats this definition of the Salvation Army, which it calls a "sect." A lawyer from the SCLJ has agreed to help the Moscow organization to get the Presnenskiy Court ruling repealed and is working with the Salvation Army. The European Court for Human Rights (ECHR) accepted the Salvation Army's case in July 2003 for consideration and ruled on June 24 that the group's complaint that they had not been allowed to reregister is admissible; however, the court declared the rest of the group's complaints inadmissible.

The Moscow branch of the Church of Scientology has continued to be denied registration by the Moscow authorities and is facing threats of liquidation. The Scientologists countered the MOJ contention that the Church had failed to reregister by the deadline by citing the 2002 Constitutional Court ruling in favor of the Salvation Army. Despite the court ruling against liquidation, the Government filed a supervisory appeal to the Supreme Court, which was granted, and the case was remanded back to the trial court for new proceedings, where the court found in the Government's favor. The Church of Scientology filed a suit with the ECHR against the liquidation order, and the court is expected to make a judgement on the case's admissibility in the fall of 2004. Local authorities denied registration to the St. Petersburg branch of the Church of Scientology four times during the previous reporting period and impeded the operation of Scientology centers in Dmitrograd, Izhevsk, and other localities. The Supreme Court also returned for retrial a liquidation order against the Khabarovsk Dianetics Center filed by the local Department of Justice, which the Church of Scientology had lost on appeal.

Representative offices of foreign religious organizations are required to register with state authorities, though they are barred from conducting services and other religious activities unless they have acquired the status of a group or organization. In practice, many foreign religious representative offices have opened without registering or have been accredited to a registered religious organization.

A November 2002 "Law on Foreigners," which transferred much of the responsibility for visa affairs from the MFA to the Ministry of the Interior (MOI), appears to have disrupted the visa regime for religious and other foreign workers, contributing to the sharp decrease in the issuance of long-term visas and causing hardship for many groups. The FSB has asserted itself into matters dealing with visas and religion, particularly where groups it views as "dangerous cults and sects" are concerned. For example, an FSB official who acted as the official representative of the the country at a June 16 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) meeting on the Relationship between Racist, Xenophobic, and anti-Semitic Propaganda on the Internet and Hate Crimes presented an official statement that labeled members of Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishnas as examples of xenophobic cults that propagated "fanatical devotion and rejection of other religions" on their Web sites. The sites, which were nonexistent, were given as evidence.

Working groups within the Government continued to focus on introducing possible amendments to the controversial 1997 law. Duma Deputy Aleksandr Chuyev is one of several officials who have proposed legislative changes to formally grant special status to "traditional" religious denominations.

In February, Chuyev announced that an interfactional deputies' group, In Support of Traditional Spiritual and Ethical Values of Russia, was to be formed in the State Duma. Chuyev's bill advocating state cooperation on healthcare, social issues, and culture with the traditional religions was not taken up during the Duma's spring session.

A religious news source reported that on May 27 and 28, the State Duma held parliamentary hearings organized by the Committee on Affairs of Public Associations and Religious

Organizations on "Improvement of the Legislation on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations—Practice of Implementation and Problems and the Way to Solution." A representative from the MOJ reported that during the past year, investigations into the activities of more than 2,000 religious groups were conducted, leading to 1,900 notifications of various violations of existing legislation. In addition, the MOJ representative reported that 246 petitions were sent to courts requesting the liquidation of a number of religious organizations, and reported that more than 4,000 monuments and more than 15,000 museum exhibits were returned to the Church. The Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad Kirill testified at the hearing and expressed his opposition to abolishing the 15-year rule, which a working group for the Commission on Questions of Religious Associations of the Government had suggested. The Metropolitan also opposed removing tax privileges for religious organizations and encouraged the Government not to oppose the introduction of a curriculum on the culture of traditional religious organizations into secondary schools.

Officials of the Presidential Administration, regions, and localities established consultative mechanisms to facilitate government interaction with religious communities and to monitor application of the 1997 law. At the national level, groups interact with a special governmental commission on religion, which includes representatives from law enforcement bodies and government ministries. On broader policy questions, religious groups interact with a special department within the Presidential Administration's Directorate for Domestic Policy, entitled the Presidential Council on Cooperation with Religious Organizations. The broad-based Council is composed of members of the Presidential Administration, secular academics who are specialists on religious affairs, and representatives of majority and minority faiths.

Discussion continued during the period covered by this report on the efficacy of creating a government ministry or organ for religious affairs, although many observers believe the idea may have been dropped after President Putin appointed a new cabinet in March. Interest in establishing such a ministry may have been prompted in part by a view held by a number of government officials, particularly in the security services, that foreign religious groups, particularly Muslims, but also Roman Catholics, some Protestant groups, and a number of religious groups relatively new to the country, constituted security threats that required greater monitoring and possibly greater control. Many religious organizations emphasized that such an institution would be unwelcome if it emulated its Soviet predecessor's repressive activities. Others, including some minority religious groups, believe that such a body could ensure equal treatment for all faiths under the law.

In June, officials in the Kursk region adopted a law restricting missionary activity, including the use of venues in which religious meetings may be held, a religious news service reported. The law was based on a 2001 law that was passed in neighboring Belgorod. A similar law was passed in Smolensk during the period covered by this report. Under these laws, foreigners visiting the region are forbidden to engage in missionary activity or to preach unless specifically allowed to do so according to their visas (some groups reportedly sent religious workers on business or tourist visas in order not to alert the authorities to their activities). In 2001, the Belgorod regional court ruled to strike the article of the law that stated that groups receiving repeated violations would be banned, and there have been no reports of a reversal of the courts' decision. Despite passage, local religious officials have indicated that there has been no enforcement of the Belgorod, Smolensk, and Kursk laws.

Contradictions between federal and local laws, and varying interpretations of the law, provide regional officials with opportunities to restrict the activities of religious minorities. Many observers attribute discriminatory practices to the greater susceptibility of local governments to discriminatory attitudes and lobbying by local majority religions. There were isolated instances in which local officials detained individuals engaged in the public discussion of their religious views, but usually these instances were resolved quickly. Although President Vladimir Putin's expressed desire for greater centralization of power and strengthening the rule of law initially led to some improvements in religious freedom in the regions, as local laws were brought into conformity with federal laws, many localities appeared to implement their own policies with very little federal interference. When the federal Government chooses to intervene, it works through the Procuracy, MOJ, Presidential Administration, and the courts to force regions to comply with federal law. The Government only occasionally intervenes to prevent or reverse discrimination at the local level.

The legal code includes strong hate-crime laws. An antiextremism bill was adopted in July 2003 with the goal of reducing religious and ethnic intolerance and limiting the activities of ultra-right-

wing organizations. The legislation prohibits advocating in public speech the superiority of any group based on religion, race, nationality, language, or other attributes; however, the law does not restrict Web sites that contain hate speech. Critics charged that the legislation could prompt a dangerous expansion of police power and that the Government had already demonstrated a lack of political will in implementing existing legislation (such as Article 282 of the Criminal Code, which governs cases of incitement of national, racial, or religious hatred). Some observers expressed particular concern about the effect of the legislation on religious freedom. In 2003, authorities in Samara subsequently made use of the antiextremism legislation to cancel the registration of a Buddhist community and the Church of the Last Covenant, and to refuse registration to communities of Scientologists and the Unification Church. In the vast majority of crimes targeting Jewish organizations and property, officials generally ignore the anti-Semitic motivation of the crimes and prosecute criminals under the much more lenient charge of "hooliganism."

The Government does not require religious instruction in schools, although in some regions the ROC uses public buildings after hours to provide religious instruction on a voluntary basis. Although still used by some schools, the Ministry of Education has rejected funding for another edition and further circulation of a textbook to accompany an optional course in public schools on the "Foundations of Orthodox Culture." A human rights group had complained about negative language describing Jews. In May, the Education Minister announced plans for a new school subject entitled, "history of religion," which would teach the history of all religions.

The Constitution mandates the availability of alternative military service to those who refuse to bear arms for religious or other reasons of conscience. The law on alternative civil service took effect on January 1, and two supplements to the law were issued in March. The first supplement listed 722 organizations to which draftees may be assigned for the alternative service, and the second listed 283 activities that draftees were permitted to perform. On June 1, Prime Minister Fradkov signed regulations regarding the implementation of the law on alternative civilian service performance. According to the regulations, the standard alternative service term will be 42 months, but the term will be shortened to 36 months if the draftee was assigned to a military organization. The required service for university graduates will be 21 and 18 months in these situations. Some human rights groups have complained that the extended length of service for draftees requesting alternative assignments (1.75 times longer than regular military service) acts as a punishment for those who choose to exercise their religious or moral convictions.

The authorities permit Orthodox chapels and priests on army bases. They give some Protestant groups access to military facilities on a more limited basis; however, Islamic services are banned, and Muslim conscripts are not given alternatives to pork-based meals or time for daily prayers.

The office of federal Human Rights Ombudsman Aleksandr Lukin contains a department dedicated to religious freedom issues, which receives and responds to complaints from individuals and groups about infringements of religious freedom. Some human rights groups, such as Soldiers' Mothers, have expressed their satisfaction with Lukin's performance since he replaced Oleg Mironov, although they have also noted that it is still too early to assess his performance. Others, such as Memorial, note with concern June reports that Lukin and the MVD have agreed that an MVD representative be assigned to all human rights organizations.

Other avenues for interaction with regional and local authorities also exist. The administrative structures of some of the offices of the seven Plenipotentiary Presidential District Representatives (polpreds) include offices that address social and religious issues. Regional administrations and many municipal administrations also have designated officials responsible for acting as a liaison with religious organizations; however, it is at the regional and municipal levels that religious minorities often encounter the greatest problems.

The Russian Academy of State Service works with religious freedom advocates, such as the Slavic Center for Law and Justice (SCLJ), to train regional and municipal officials in implementing the law properly. The academy opens up many of its conferences to international audiences.

In June, the federally targeted program on tolerance and antiextremism was closed ahead of its original 2005 end date. The program called for a large number of interagency measures, such as the review of federal and regional legislation on extremism, mandatory training for public

officials to promote ethnic and religious tolerance, and new materials for use in public educational institutions. Presidential Human Rights Commission Chair Ella Pamfilova expressed shock over the decision to liquidate the tolerance program and called it "political nearsightedness." A representative involved with the program remarked that the implications of the program's early cancellation were unclear at this point, but that several Government leaders have continued to express interest in attending tolerance conferences organized by a group that sponsors the program.

Since 1993, officials have encouraged a revival of Buddhism in Kalmykia, along with state subsidies for building Buddhist temples and training monks. Despite this support, officials state that Buddhism is not the state religion in Kalmykia. Kalmykiya President Ilyumzhinov told a June 3 federal Government meeting that the country's Buddhists intend to appeal to the Constitutional Court against the MFA's decision to deny the Dalai Lama a visa. The Constitutional Court has denied that any appeal had been received.

The local government in the Republic of Tatarstan, one of the strongest Islamic areas, continued to encourage a Tatar cultural and religious revival, while avoiding instituting confrontational religious policies. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Tatarstan government has funded the construction of some 1,000 mosques and several dozen Islamic schools.

The regions of Kabardino-Balkariya and Dagestan have laws banning extremist religious activities, described as "Wahhabism," but there were no reports that authorities invoked these laws to deny Muslim groups registration. On June 11, deputies at the State Duma rejected a bill that would criminalize "Wahhabism" and other "extremist" activities because, among other things, the term "Wahhabi" was said to be too broad a category and not defined well enough to cast into law.

In June 2003, President Putin stated publicly that secular authorities would do everything in their power to help improve relations between the ROC and the Vatican. Following this, the President met with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican in November 2003, a move that both sides viewed as a positive step toward improved understanding between the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches. However, the ROC continues to complain vociferously about Roman Catholic incursion into traditionally non-Catholic areas.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Critics continue to identify several aspects of the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience as providing a basis for actions that restrict religious freedom. In particular, they criticize the provisions allowing the Government to ban religious organizations, requiring organizations to reregister, and establishing procedures for their liquidation. Critics also cite provisions that not only limit the rights of religious "groups," but also require that religious groups exist for 15 years before they can qualify for "organization" status. Although the situation is somewhat better for groups that were registered before 1997, groups new to the country are hindered in their ability to practice their faith. The federal Government has attempted to apply the 1997 law widely and critics direct most of their allegations of restrictive practices at local officials. Implementation of the 1997 law varies widely, depending on the attitude of local offices of the MOJ (responsible for registration, liquidation, and bans).

The Procuracy of Moscow's Northern Circuit banned the local organization of Jehovah's Witnesses on the grounds that it was a threat to society, a basis for banning a religious organization under the 1997 law. Unlike liquidation, which involves only the loss of juridical status, a ban prohibits the activities of an entire religious community. On June 16, a ban on all organized activity by Moscow's 10,000 members of Jehovah's Witnesses took effect, marking one of the first times that such a ban has been implemented under the 1997 religion law. Members of Jehovah's Witnesses appealed the ruling, and although the judge admitted that members did not incite violent religious hatred, he did accuse the organization of "forcing families to disintegrate, violating the equal rights of parents in the upbringing of their children, violating the Constitution and freedom of conscience, encouraging suicide, and inciting citizens to refuse both military and alternative service." The June 16 ban, although applying only to Moscow, could set a dangerous precedent for the 133,000 members of Jehovah's Witnesses practicing in the country.

Many local congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the country reported that the rental contracts on their buildings were either being cancelled or that they faced that risk by landlords. Members of Jehovah's Witnesses reported an increase in these denials after court decisions to ban all religious activity by the group in Moscow, first on March 26 and then on June 16, were publicized. Some landlords have misunderstood the exact ruling and believed they were obligated by law to cancel rental contracts with the group. In Sochi, in June, members of Jehovah's Witnesses were denied access to a meeting venue after the FSB pressured the landlord; the decision to deny access was later reversed and the meeting took place.

In March, the Bashkortostan Supreme Court banned the local Dianetics Center. The Center continues its operations despite the verdict. The Center's representatives have filed an appeal with the Supreme Court and began to prepare documents for filing a suit with the ECHR.

The SCLJ advised the "Faith in Action" Bible College in Vladivostok to seek official registration and counseled the organization that further appeals of a May 2003 Supreme Court decision upholding a March 2003 decision to liquidate the college would be fruitless. The college had been accused of conducting religious education without a license, though lawyers for the school argued there was no basis to the accusations as long as the school did not issue diplomas or certificates.

At the end of the reporting period, the new Magadan Cathedral remained unconsecrated in symbolic recognition of Bishop Jerzy Mazur's absence, despite the arrival of the new Bishop, Kirill Klimovich. In March 2002, Father Shields won his court case, which challenged the legality of his nomination as priest of the local Catholic parish on the grounds that he is a foreign citizen.

Although past reports indicated the FSB made frequent visits to the Family of God Pentacostal Community, the Moscow branch of the SCLJ, which provided legal counseling to the community, reported no continuing harassment during the reporting period, and reported that the community had since been reregistered.

While many of the restrictions on religious freedom are associated with the 1997 law, there were other unrelated restrictions enacted at the local level.

Some local governments prevented religious groups from using venues suitable for large gatherings such as cinemas and government facilities. Forum 18 reported that in March 2003, a 300-member unregistered Baptist community was unexpectedly informed they could no longer rent premises at a public library in Moscow where they had met for the previous 6 years.

Regional and local authorities at times have refused to let facilities to local Jehovah's Witnesses communities, especially since the June 16 Moscow court ruling banning the group. Religious conventions held by members of Jehovah's Witnesses were disrupted in Moscow, Yekaterinburg, Vladimir, Khabarovsk, Stavropol Kray, Nizhny Novgorod, and Pyatigorsk in the period covered by this report. The Witnesses were told in Vladimir that they could use a venue to meet as long as they had permission from a local Russian Orthodox priest. In Krasnoyarsk, the Jehovah's Witnesses community managed to rent facilities only with assistance of a local expert on religious issues. In August 2003, in Stavropol, members of Jehovah's Witnesses were notified that their convention was cancelled, after territorial and city administrations, the Council for Security in Stavropol Territory, and the ROC met and determined that the meeting presented a high risk for crime in connection with terrorist attacks. When a new location was found, police demanded the event be stopped because a permit had not been obtained and because it was necessary to inspect the premises for explosives. Videotapes of the incident show that officials were armed with large guns. Also in August 2003, in Stavropol, a sign-language convention for members of Jehovah's Witnesses was disrupted when police prevented delegates from entering the building. When a new meeting place was obtained, electricity was cut off from the building; despite this, the convention was held. The members of Jehovah's Witnesses filed a claim against the police for the disruption of the event, but in September 2003, the Oktyabrskiy District Court of the City of Stavropol ruled against the group, and in November 2003, a higher court upheld the decision. In July 2003, police surrounded a stadium in Nizhny Novgorod and prevented delegates from entering the convention. Also in July 2003, a similar convention was disrupted in Pyatigorsk when police blocked the entrance preventing approximately 10,000 delegates from participating. Members of Jehovah's Witnesses lodged a complaint with the Prosecutor's Office of the Stavropol Territory, but the Prosecutor's Office dismissed the complaint.

An unconfirmed report from members of Jehovah's Witnesses in Sakhalin region stated that the group is facing an ongoing campaign by the authorities against their right to gather for worship in the region. Forum 18 reports indicate that following the ban on Jehovah's Witnesses activity in Moscow, one Russian Orthodox priest, Fr. Oleg Stenyayev, suggested a similar ban in Sakhalin region, and that a new Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall be confiscated and given to local Muslims. Sakhalin's Vice-Governor, Georgi Karlov responded favorably to this suggestion.

There are no indications that Pentecostals were harassed by the Khabarovsk administration's Department of Religion during the reporting period.

An unconfirmed Forum 18 report stated that the FSB had summoned the leadership of the Old Believers on the eve of their church leadership election on February 9 to indicate the FSB's preference for a particular candidate who ultimately was not elected.

Members of Jehovah's Witnesses cite five child custody cases in which courts have reportedly discriminated against their religion. In Dagestan, in April 2002, a mother lost custody of her two children to an absentee father, because she was a member of Jehovah's Witnesses. The case was appealed to the ECHR and the court found in favor of the mother. Members of Jehovah's Witnesses note that six cases were resolved in favor of members of the group who sought custody of their children.

Human rights groups and religious minorities have criticized the Procurator General for encouraging legal action against some minority religions and for giving an imprimatur of authority to materials that are biased against Muslims, members of Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and others. The FSB, the Procurator, and other official agencies have conducted campaigns of harassment against Muslims, Roman Catholics, some Protestant groups, and newer religious movements. Religious groups and organizations faced investigations for purported criminal activity, landlords were pressured to renege on contracts, and in some cases the security services are thought to have influenced the MOJ to reject registration applications.

Although Pastor Martinez' Kingdom of God Church in Moscow reported disruptions by law enforcement officers and others in previous reporting periods, he reported no attacks during this reporting period and his church has been officially registered. Likewise, the Mormons in the Far East have not reported visits by law enforcement officials during this reporting period in contrast with the previous reporting period.

While many in the Jewish community claim that conditions for Jews have improved in recent history, primarily because there is no longer any official "state-sponsored" anti-Semitism, anti-Semitic incidents against individuals and institutions continue to occur and violence is used during these attacks with increasing frequency compared with the previous reporting period. The Anti-Defamation League reports that while the number of anti-Semitic incidents remained stable in 2003, the nature of the attacks has become more violent. Anti-Semitic statements are not encouraged and have even been legally prosecuted. While the Government has publicly denounced nationalist ideology and supports legal action against acts of anti-Semitism, reluctance of lower-level officials to call such acts anything other than "hooliganism" remains problematic. In March, prominent Rabbis Berel Lazar and Pinchas Goldshmidt came together to call on the Government to better define the meaning of extremism. Lazar and Goldshmidt said that law enforcers were prone to dismiss anti-Semitic actions as simple hooliganism to avoid calling attention to their region as extremist-oriented and/or to consciously protect extremist groups with which they sympathized. In June 2003, President Putin met with major foreign Jewish organization leaders, and in April, many of the same leaders met again with Foreign Minister Lavrov. There have been multiple cases of anti-Semitic statements from government authorities in some of the country's regions, specifically in Krasnodar Kray and Kursk Oblast, as well as in the State Duma.

The Rodina bloc united several openly anti-Semitic politicians with former Chairman of the State Duma's International Affairs Commission Dmitriy Rogozin. Originally registered with well-known neo-Nazis on its electoral list, Rodina attempted to improve its image by rejecting openly neo-Nazi candidates; however, it has allowed others known for their anti-Semitic hate speeches to remain, such as Andrey Savelev, a former co-leader of the now defunct Congress of Russian Communities (KRO) and Rogozin, its former primary ideologist.

Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and his Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) party are also known

for their anti-Semitic rhetoric and statements. In Moscow during a May Day celebration, LDPR supporters rallied, carrying anti-Semitic signs and spoke out against what they called "world Zionism."

The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) also made anti-Semitic statements during the Duma elections. Krasnodar Kray Senator Nikolai Kondratenko blamed Zionism and Jews in general for many of the country's problems and blamed Soviet Jews for helping to destroy the Soviet Union, according to a November 2003 article in "Volgogradskaya Tribuna."

The ultranationalist and anti-Semitic Russian National Unity (RNE) paramilitary organization continued to propagate hostility toward Jews and non-Orthodox Christians. The RNE appears to have lost political influence in some regions since its peak in 1998, but the organization maintained high levels of activity in other regions, such as Voronezh.

A splinter group of the RNE called "Russian Rebirth" has registered successfully in the past in Tver and Nizhniy Novgorod as a social organization, prompting protests from human rights groups; however, in several regions such as Moscow and Kareliya, the authorities have successfully limited the activities of the RNE by denying registration to their local affiliates. Despite losing its registration as a political party, the National Sovereign Party of Russia (NDPR) is still active. NDPR activists distributed their newspaper Russian Front in downtown Kostroma along with leaflets reading "Russia, liberate yourself from (ethnic slur) fascism."

As reported in 2003, law enforcement personnel monitored some Muslim groups operating in Sverdlosk Oblast, especially their hate literature focused on the conflict in Chechnya. No update on the monitoring, or any subsequent criminal cases, was available at the close of the reporting period.

Some religious personnel experienced visa and customs difficulties while entering or leaving the country. Authorities either deported or denied entry to several religious workers with valid visas during the period covered by this report. Forum 18 news service reports that to date, there are over 30 reported cases of foreign religious workers of various faiths who have been barred from the country since the mid-1990s.

It is difficult to get a religious visa, and some foreign workers reported they feel they have little choice but to conceal the true purpose of their visit. This often leaves foreign workers open to accusations from authorities that they have misrepresented the purpose of their travel and therefore do not qualify for another visa.

Foreign religious workers without residency permits typically must go abroad once a year to renew their visas, usually back to their countries of origin; some receive multiple-entry visas or are able to extend their stays. Since the enactment of a Law on Foreigners and subsequent amendments that took effect in 2002, some religious workers report difficulty obtaining visas with terms longer than 3 months (even if they had previously held visas with one year validity). The curtailed validity has led some religious groups to begin shuttling their missionaries in and out of the country every 3 months, presenting a financial, psychological, and spiritual hardship for such groups. Missionaries under such restrictions must pay for travel back to countries of origin, often not knowing if they may ever return. As a result, many missionary groups must find and maintain two workers for every position if one is to be available for ministry while the other is outside the country applying for a visa renewal. Officials in the Duma, MFA, and MOJ have stated that the changes in visa validity are a result of administrative adjustments due to the new regulations. Some have asserted that the issuance of 3-month visas is a temporary situation.

Contrary to previous reporting years, there were no reported expulsions of Roman Catholic priests during the reporting period. Authorities reversed a February 2003 decision that denied Catholic priest Bronislaw Czaplicki, who had worked in the country for 11 years, an extension of his residency permit. He returned to St. Petersburg in May 2003 after being issued a 3-month visa and is no longer having immigration problems. Local Catholic leaders now believe the problem was administrative rather than a conscious effort to limit Catholic activities in the region.

Catholic Archbishop Kondrusiewicz reported that there have not been any visa denials for Catholic priests during the period covered by this report. Other Catholic sources indicate that none of the expelled priests in previous years have been able to return, including Bishop Jerzy

Mazur, Fathers Wisniewski and Mackiewicz, all Polish citizens; Father Stefano Caprio, an Italian; and Father Krajnak, a Slovak. In 2003, mostly 3-month visas were issued for Catholic priests, and this situation continues for many priests; however, some now have been able to obtain 1-year visas. Krasnodar Krai remains an extremely difficult region in which to obtain a visa. At the time of this report, only 3-month visas were being issued. Celibate Catholic clergy do not have the option to gain permanent residency or citizenship on the basis of marriage to citizens, unlike other religious workers who have done so.

Contrary to previous reporting periods, there were no reports of religious workers of minority faiths having difficulties registering their visas with the local authorities, as required by law. In March 2002, authorities detained Riga-based Pentecostal pastor Aleksey Ledyayev an estimated 9 to 11 hours before being returned to Riga when he flew to Moscow. Authorities reportedly left Ledyayev's Russian visa in his Latvian passport without canceling it, but offered no explanation for their actions. Ledyayev has not had problems since the incident in March 2002. In the fall of 2002, a Khabarovsk court attempted to deport two Mormon missionaries for failing to register their visas, but the court decision was reversed and the missionaries were successfully registered. The individuals involved did not report continuing problems during the reporting period.

The Government has denied the Dalai Lama a visa since 1994. The MFA announced in June that the Dalai Lama again would not receive a visa out of consideration for the effect visa issuance could have on the country's relations with China. Kalmykiya President Ilyumzhinov promised to appeal the ruling and continues to advocate on the Dalai Lama's behalf.

Mormons noted an improvement in the reporting period in securing visas for their foreign missionaries and reported that all of their foreign missionaries have received 1-year, multiple entry visas. The Mormons encountered some difficulties in securing residency permits for missionaries, but noted the difficulties varied from region to region and did not constitute a systemic problem. Authorities have never officially accused Mormon missionaries of proselytism.

Dan Pollard of the Vanino Baptist Church in Khabarovsk region continued to be barred from the country as of April, Forum 18 news service reported. Pollard's visa application was rejected first in 1999, despite his acquittal on earlier tax and customs charges. A judge in Khabarovsk issued an order in July 2002 clearing Pollard of any obstacles to entering the country, but Khabarovsk officials have still not complied, even though legal obstacles barring Pollard from the country officially ended in March. Forum 18 reported that the FSB responded to an inquiry from a lawyer for the Church by stating that Pollard would be unable to return. There was no new information available for the case of Charles Landreth of the Church of Christ in Volgograd, who was refused a visa in the fall of 1999 amid accusations in the Volgograd press of spying.

There was no new information available on Patrick Nolan, a member of the Unification Church. Nolan was denied entry in June 2002, because security services considered Nolan's activities a threat to the nation. Nolan lost both a court case in April 2003 and an appeal before the Supreme Court in June 2003.

Leo Martensson, of the Swedish Evangelical Church in Krasnodar, and Victor Barousse, a Christian working for the Global Strategy Missions Association in Irkutsk, were refused visas in 2002 despite both having lived in the country for 9 years. They were not able to return during the reporting period. Larry Little, of the Church of Christ in Komi, continued to be denied permission to return since his religious visa was canceled in 2001. Randolph Marshall, a missionary with the OMS Christian organization continued to be barred since he was refused reentry in November 2002.

The SCLJ reported that it was unaware of further attempts by Jeff and Susan Wollman and Rolland and Virginia Cook to reenter the country, and that the couples continued to be denied visas. The Wollmans and the Cooks had taken an active part in the work of the Christian Church in Kostroma and were denied visas to reenter in July 2002. The Consular Services of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the two families were denied visas for state security reasons. There was no information to suggest that American preacher Bill Northon had attempted to reenter the country. Northon was invited to Kostroma by "The Family of God" Pentecostal Church, but was denied a visa on three different occasions, starting in summer 2002, for the same state security reasons.

While most conscripts looking for exemptions from military service sought medical or student exemptions, the courts provided relief to others on the grounds of their religious convictions. Members of Jehovah's Witnesses reported 40 court cases where conscripts defended their right not to serve in the military. Out of these 40 cases, 11 were adjudicated in favor of the objector, 6 against, and 23 cases were still ongoing. One refusal of exemption, in Bashkortostan, for Marsel Faizov, was upheld based upon a criminal conviction of the appellant. Faizov's efforts to have the conviction overturned reached the Supreme Court in November 2003, but the court upheld the lower courts' decisions. In a separate case, a Russian Orthodox priest was permitted to testify as an expert against a member of Jehovah's Witnesses who had applied for conscientious objector status.

According to nongovernment sources, there have been no criminal cases initiated against conscripts refusing to serve in the military on the grounds of their religious convictions during the reporting period. The law on alternative service came into effect in January, and conscript boards waiting for the new law to come into force made no attempts to prosecute those who refused to participate in military service.

Some religious groups reported problems with religious properties. In Sosnovyy Bor in northwest Russia, local authorities refused to let a Jehovah's Witnesses community use land to construct a prayer center. The refusal was based on the results of a March 14 referendum, in which 90 percent of the city inhabitants voted against the construction.

In Khabarovsk, members of Jehovah's Witnesses purchased a building, but the authorities refused to register the title despite three court orders to do so. The group reported that the building was secretly sold to another buyer under whom the title was registered in February 2003. A claim has been filed against the vendor, the new buyer, and the MOJ and was awaiting trial.

Voronezh authorities prohibited a local Lutheran community from using a private apartment for religious services, but failed to support the prohibition with any legislative acts. For several years, the Voronezh Lutheran Community has been unsuccessful in trying to gain back its church. When registering in 2000, the community had to list a private apartment as its legal address.

Religious news sources reported that Orthodox churches not belonging to the Moscow Patriarchate, including the True Orthodox, have sometimes been restricted from obtaining or holding onto buildings for worship.

The only existing Hare Krishna temple in Moscow has been demolished, and the situation with the construction of a new temple has not been resolved. According to the Moscow Veda Cultural Center, on January 1 Mayor Luzhkov signed a decree allocating land in northwest Moscow for construction of the first Veda temple in the country. Several construction projects of the building have been reportedly under consideration. Moscow authorities have not provided the Center with temporary facilities, but the Center has been successfully renting facilities in Moscow and the Moscow region for gathering and religious services. The difficulties concerning construction of a new complex began in October 2003 when the Union of Orthodox Citizens sent a letter to Moscow Mayor Luzhkov protesting against construction of a Krishna temple on a place called Khodynskiye field.

The Moscow Krishna Community, which is separate from the Hare Krishnas, sought assistance from the leaders of the Russian Interreligious Council, which is made up of representatives of the four traditional religions, but received a refusal from the Council's Executive Secretary Roman Silantsev, who stated that they were a "degrading sect." As of April 21, Deputy Moscow Mayor Vladimir Resin assured the Moscow Krishna Community that it would receive a 3,000 to 4,000 thousand square meter property in Northwest Moscow in order to compensate for its "moral losses."

On April 19, the Moscow Buddhist Community "Rinchen Ling" received notification that a territorial agency of the Moscow Northern Administrative District filed an appeal with the Arbitrary Court demanding that the community be forcefully evicted from its building, which the community received in 1997 for a 15-year beneficial rent. In September 2003, the authorities had decided to demolish the building and demanded that the community vacate the building before the end of 2003. No other buildings were offered to the community and the community

did not have money to rent a new building. Despite the lack of a court decision, the community's electric and water supply were cut for 2 days in April.

Citizens in Kaliningrad protested against the construction of a mosque, which the local Muslim community has been requesting since 1993. The ROC is involved in the talks to allow construction. While it claims not to be against the mosque's construction, the local Bishop insists that a small mosque rather than a large Muslim cultural center should be built in the suburbs, proportional to the small number of Muslims living in Kaliningrad. The Muslim community has been unsuccessful in negotiating an agreement with the local authorities. The Roman Catholic Community reports 44 disputed properties, most of which were properties used for religious services.

Restitution of religious property seized by the Communist government remained an issue. Many properties used for religious services, including churches, synagogues, and mosques, have been returned, although some in the Jewish community assert that only a small portion of the total properties confiscated under Soviet rule has been returned. The Jewish community is still seeking the return of a number of synagogues, religious scrolls, and cultural and religious artifacts, such as the Schneerson book collection, a revered collection of the Chabad Lubavitch.

Contrary to the previous reporting period, in which there were no functioning synagogues in Krasnodar Kray, there is now a two-room Jewish community center in Sochi that is used as a synagogue. There are no synagogues in Krasnodar city. There was no information to indicate that officials have returned a synagogue in Krasnodar that was confiscated in 1936. A news service reported in June 2003 that authorities in Krasnodar officially refused to return the synagogue, arguing that there were no alternative locations to house the occupants (a youth radio school). In May 2003, Krasnodar officials refused a request by the Jewish community to stop construction of a sports complex that threatened to destroy a Jewish cemetery. There are no updates on this case at the end of the period covered by this report. Muslims in Krasnodar continued unsuccessfully to attempt to gain authorization from the mayor's office to build a new mosque in the city of Sochi.

Roman Catholics continue to pursue legal avenues towards restoration of the Saint Peter and Saint Paul Cathedral in Moscow. The office of an oil company currently occupies the cathedral, and the Catholic parish is meeting in a former disco hall because it does not expect the company to vacate the premises. According to ROC officials, the Catholic Church did not submit its proposal to the ROC leadership and therefore has encroached on the ROC's spiritual territory.

The ROC appears to have had greater success reclaiming prerevolutionary property than other groups, although it still has disputed property despite its preferential treatment. Patriarch Aleksiy II asked Moscow Mayor Luzhkov to give the ROC retroactive property tax benefits, which were cut in accordance with the new Tax Code. Accordingly, the Moscow City Duma passed a law returning approximately \$27,500 (approximately 800,000 rubles) on March 10.

The St. Petersburg Russian Orthodox Old Believers' Community has not been able to get its church returned, which was confiscated by Soviet authorities in 1922, only 7 years after its original purchase.

On January 17, in Stavropol, Cossacks protested against the federal authorities' decision to turn a city art gallery back into a mosque because it was located in the center of Stavropol. The Cossacks insisted that the mosque should be built in a different place. First Deputy Stavropol Administration Head Nikolay Zhukov assured the Cossacks and citizens of Stavropol that they had the administration's support. The local Muslim community insists that according to the 1993 law on returning religious property, the building should be returned to the community; however, opponents argue that the building has never been used for religious services and as the building is located in the center of Stavropol, early morning calls to prayer will wake citizens and will create vehicle and foot traffic as well as noise in an urban residential area.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were reports that city administrators and local police in the town of Liski, Voronezh Oblast, broke up an antidrug demonstration on August 29, which was organized by the President of the Voronezh Center for Spiritual Rebirth, Pastor Andrey Bashmakov, and the

Pastor of the Congregation of the United Churches of Christians of Evangelical Faith, Grigory Protsenko. Bashmakov told the press that attendees were beaten in the street and at the police station. Among the victims were the wife and 12-year-old son of Pastor Protsenko, who suffered head injuries. Witnesses photographed and videotaped the beatings and sent the materials to Moscow news outlets. In January, Protsenko was served notice that a criminal case was opened against him for allegedly resisting and attacking a police officer at the August demonstration. The charges were later dropped, and activists familiar with the case believe that the videotaped evidence played a role. According to Pastor Protsenko, the Deputy Mayor of Liski said he opposed Protsenko's group in principle and stated the Pentecostals were a sect.

In March, a roundtable was held to discuss special operations conducted by law enforcement agencies in Moscow mosques leading up to the Presidential elections in May. Many Muslims were detained during the operations, which the Moscow police claimed were carried out on agreement with the Spiritual Directorate for European Russia (SDER); however, the SCER refuted the police claims. The Moscow Muslim Community condemned the law enforcement agencies' actions and claimed that they looked like deliberate attempts to destabilize the situation before the election.

There were instances in which local officials detained individuals engaged in the public discussion of their religious views, but such incidences were resolved quickly. For example, local police frequently detained missionaries for brief periods throughout the country, or asked them to cease their activities, such as displaying signboards on city streets, regardless of whether they were actually in violation of local statutes on picketing.

There were no received reports of continued raids on groups suspected of terrorism during the period covered by this report. In June 2003, authorities carried out a raid on Muslim terrorist suspects, many of who were suspected members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, an international Islamic group banned in the country in February 2003. Officials freed most of the suspects the following day; criminal proceedings on weapons charges were opened against only two of the suspects.

There were reports of short-term religious detainees but no reports of religious prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion

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

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious news services report that in June the Arbitration Court of Sverdlovsk Oblast ordered the shutdown of a local anti-Semitic paper, Russkaya Obshchina Yekaterinburga, according to the Jewish National-Cultural Autonomy of Sverdlovsk Oblast. The newspaper had received three warnings from the Ministry of the Press based on complaints from activists. In October 2002, the Prosecutor's office had closed the criminal case; however, in June, the Court found that the newspaper violated the laws banning incitement of ethnic hatred and ordered the newspaper closed down. The court also fined a company that publishes the newspaper approximately \$34 (1,000 rubles).

In March, then Russian Minister for Nationalities Vladimir Zorin brought extremism to the forefront of public attention by calling anti-Semitism and xenophobia major threats to the country. Zorin called for stricter enforcement of the country's existing statutes outlawing extremism, specifically article 282 of the Criminal Code (inciting ethnic hatred), and anti-Semitism and tolerance education programs. In addition, Russian Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev became the first high government official to acknowledge the existence of right-wing extremist youth groups in the country. Combating this extremism was one of the top priority tasks for the MVD and FSB, he said. These statements marked a positive step on behalf of the Government in its willingness to prosecute those who commit acts of anti-Semitism, although few concrete steps have been taken to solve high-profile cases, such as the killing of a 9-year-

old Tajik girl that prompted Nurgaliyev's statement.

Some minority groups were able to obtain restitution of their religious property. In June 2003, city authorities in Oryol approved the restitution of a synagogue in the city after years of petitions by the local Jewish community. There have been no additional reports of problems concerning the property during the period covered by this report. The Buryat leaders of the traditional Buddhist Sangha (Organization) won back the rights to the oldest Buddhist temple in Europe during the previous reporting period, and continue to occupy the building. A secular group had occupied the temple for the previous 4 years, despite a 2002 city court decision in favor of the Sangha. City officials supported the Buddhists' efforts to occupy the temple.

In March, Tula City Duma Deputies returned a church to the local Catholic community. The church was officially given to the Tula Catholic community in 1994, but the building was occupied by a forensic medical practice until 2003. In December 2003, the Tula regional Duma refused to support the 1994 decision without offering an explanation for the change. In March, 13 out of 25 Duma deputies unexpectedly voted in favor of returning the church to the community. Tula Mayor Kazakov signed the corresponding decree on March 30.

The delayed construction of the Catholic Church in Pskov resumed in September 2003, and the church has been completed. Roman Catholics also obtained final approval from the mayor's office for construction of a church in the historical center of Yaroslavl. The land adjoins a building that housed a pre-Revolutionary Catholic chapel, and while approval was withheld unexpectedly in July 2003, construction has resumed and is proceeding according to schedule.

The Government has backed off from previous plans to introduce an optional course, "Foundations of Orthodox Culture," using a textbook that detailed Orthodox Christianity's contribution to the country's culture. Although still used by some schools, the Ministry of Education has rejected funding for another edition and further circulation of the textbook. A human rights group had complained about anti-Semitic language in the book. In December 2003, former Education Minister Vladimir Filippov announced that the issue would be left up to regional Governments, and perhaps even individual schools. In May, the current Education Minister, Andrei Fursenko, announced plans for a new school subject entitled, "history of religion," which would teach the history of all religions.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Religious matters are not a source of societal hostility for most citizens; however, many citizens firmly believe that at least nominal adherence to the ROC is at the heart of what it means to be Russian. Popular attitudes toward traditionally Muslim ethnic groups are negative in many regions, and there are manifestations of anti-Semitism as well as societal hostility toward Roman Catholics and newer, non-Orthodox religions. Instances of religiously motivated violence continue, although it was often difficult to determine whether xenophobia, religion, or ethnic prejudices were the primary motivation behind violent attacks. Conservative activists claiming ties to the ROC disseminated negative publications and staged demonstrations throughout the country against Roman Catholics, Protestants, members of Jehovah's Witnesses, and religions new to the country, and some ROC leaders publicly expressed similar views.

There is no large-scale movement in the country to promote interfaith dialogue, although the President oversees a Commission of Religious Affairs that includes representatives from a wide range of faiths that are active in the country. Religious groups successfully collaborate on the local level on charity projects and participate in interfaith dialogues. Pentecostal and Baptist organizations, as well as the ROC, have been reluctant to support ecumenism. At the international level, the ROC has traditionally pursued interfaith dialogue with other Christians; however, the Patriarch appeared displeased with the Vatican's 2002 decision to upgrade its four apostolic administrations to dioceses. Individuals closely associated with Russian Orthodox and Muslim hierarchies made numerous hostile statements opposing the decision and continue to consider it a source of tension.

A number of small, radical-nationalist newspapers are readily available throughout the country. They carry anti-Semitic as well as anti-Muslim and xenophobic leaflets, much of which violates the law against extremism. Nevertheless the production of this material continues, and the publishers are rarely prosecuted. For example, an anti-Semitic novel, *The Nameless Beast*, by Evgeny Chebalin, has been on sale in the State Duma's bookstore since September 2003. The

xenophobic and anti-Semitic text makes offensive comparisons of Jews and non-Russians. According to the Anti-Defamation League, books sold in the Duma are not typically monitored for content. In cases where Jewish or other public organizations have attempted to take legal action against the publishers, the courts are generally unwilling to recognize the presence of anti-Semitic content. Some NGOs claimed that many of these publications are owned or managed by the same local authorities that refuse to take action against offenders.

Other examples of anti-Semitic hate speech include the painting of the main entrance of a Jewish school with anti-Semitic graffiti in October 2003 and a December 2003 preelection comparison of Judaism to Satanism in the Bryansk local administration's official newspaper.

Anti-Semitism and xenophobic thought has become increasingly popular among certain sectors of the population. Nationalistic parties, such as Rodina and LDPR, have gained a wider voter base by addressing issues of nationalism, race, ethnicity, and religion.

The number of underground nationalist extremist organizations (as distinguished from such quasipublic groups as the RNE) appears to be growing. According to the MOI, there are approximately 50,000 skinheads in the country, including between 5,000 and 5,500 in Moscow. The primary targets of skinheads were foreigners and individuals from the North Caucasus, but they expressed anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic sentiments as well. As in previous years, nationalists distributed anti-Semitic literature in Moscow and elsewhere during the Victory Day holiday in May.

Hostility toward non-Russian Orthodox religious groups sparked harassment and occasionally even physical attacks. On June 19, Nikolai Girenko, an expert on xenophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism, was shot and killed in his apartment in St. Petersburg after a death threat appeared on the Web site of the nationalist group, "Russian Republic." The group took responsibility for the killing; however, some experts believe the real killer may be one of the violent extremists incarcerated as a result of Girenko's testimony. Girenko had served for many years as an expert witness in trials involving alleged skinheads and neo-Nazis. He was also involved in a program to promote religious and ethnic tolerance whose funding the Government recently canceled.

Muslims, the largest religious minority, continue to encounter societal discrimination and antagonism in some areas. Discrimination has become stronger since the onset of the conflict in the predominantly Muslim region of Chechnya and the 2002 takeover of a Moscow theater by armed Chechen separatists and suicide bombings at the Tushino airfield in July 2003 and on the Moscow metro in January. Muslims have claimed that citizens in certain regions have a fear of Muslims, citing cases such as a dispute in Kolomna, approximately 60 miles southeast of Moscow, over the proposed construction of a mosque. Government officials, journalists, and the public have been quick to label Muslim organizations "Wahhabi," a term that has become equivalent with "extremist." Such sentiment has led to a formal ban on Wahhabism in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkariya. In the fall of 2002 and spring of 2003, several prominent human rights activists expressed concern about the rise in anti-Islamic attitudes.

Numerous press reports documented anti-Islamic sentiment, and a large number of small, radical-nationalist newspapers distributed throughout the country carry anti-Muslim, as well as anti-Semitic and xenophobic leaflets.

Muslim activists complain that the country is not entirely a secular state, based on the Government's active support of the Russian Orthodox majority. Muslim recruits serving in the army often are subjected to insults and abuse on the basis of religion. Tatarstan's human rights ombudsman reported that many Muslim youths have deserted the army rather than risk going to Chechnya and fighting fellow Muslims.

In Muslim-dominated regions other than Chechnya, relations between Muslims and Russian Orthodox believers are generally harmonious. In the Volga region, a liberal brand of Islamic thought dubbed "Euro-Islam" has been growing in influence; however, tensions occasionally emerge. Law enforcement organizations closely watch Muslim groups operating in the country. Officials often describe Muslim charitable organizations as providing aid to extremists in addition to their overt charitable work. Extremist versions of Islam, such as Wahhabism or Salafism, are often immediately associated with terrorism and radical Muslim fighters in Chechnya and Ingushetiya.

The chairman of the Council of Muftis, Ravil Gaynutdin; the head of the Central Spiritual Board of Russia's Muslims, Talgat Tadzhuiddin; and the head of the Coordinating Center of Muslims of the North Caucasus, Ismail Berdiev issued a joint statement denouncing terrorism. The leaders declared that it was necessary to put up resistance against extremists and terrorists who make use of religious slogans.

In May, 50 tombs were desecrated in Yekaterinburg. Similar acts of vandalism at this cemetery were reported in spring 2003. On May 9, 30 tombstones were broken during the night in a Sverdlovsk cemetery. No investigation results have been reported. Twenty-six tombs were desecrated in a Muslim cemetery in Yoshkar-Oly in February; witnesses claim to have seen 40 teenagers in the cemetery area. In November 2003, a mosque in Bratsk, Irkutsk Region was set on fire, and while regional authorities promised aid to the local Muslim community, it was never provided nor were the arsonists ever found. In August 2003, in Chelyabinsk, a Muslim cemetery was desecrated and swastikas were painted on several tombstones. In May 2003, a mosque in Usole-Sibirsk was firebombed during a worship service. No one was injured in the attack. There was no new information available on the case at the end of the period covered by this report.

During the reporting period, vandals regularly attacked the "Tauba" mosque in Nizhniy Novgorod. Groups of teenagers and young persons routinely threw dirt at the walls and broke the mosque's windows. Mosque employees reported threats, and vandals in April again broke windows and painted swastikas on the walls. A police guard was stationed at the mosque to prevent any incidents related to Hitler's birthday celebration, but the mosque was attacked in the night after the guards left. Nizhniy Novgorod's Regional Spiritual Board of Muslims has repeatedly contacted the local police and district administration but no concrete measures have been taken.

It has been estimated that the number of xenophobic publications exceeds 100; many of which are sponsored by local chapters of NDPR. The larger anti-Semitic publications are *Russkaya Pravda*, *Vitaz*, and *Peresvet*, which are easily available in the multitude of metro stations located around Moscow. In addition, there are at least 80 Russian Web sites dedicated to distributing anti-Semitic propaganda; the law does not restrict Web sites that contain hate speech.

In June 2002, the local prosecutor's office in Ulyanovsk opened a criminal case under Article 282 against the editor of the local newspaper *Orthodox Simbirsk*, who ran a number of articles demonizing Jewish persons. In January, there were preliminary hearings in Leninskiy District Court. The case was ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report.

Jewish groups report that although the number of attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions has remained constant over the past few years, the severity of such violent attacks has increased. Crimes are mostly committed by young skinhead groups, whose numbers have increased from only a few dozen in 1992 to over 50,000 today. Typically, skinheads form loosely organized groups of 10 to 15 persons, and, while these groups do not usually belong to any larger organized structure, they tend to communicate through the hundreds of fascist journals and magazines that exist throughout the country, and increasingly on the Internet.

In April, Jewish youth leader Aleksandr Golynsky was beaten near his home in Ulyanovsk and sent to the hospital. Two days later, skinheads stormed the Ulyanovsk Jewish Center screaming, "don't pollute our land," smashing windows, and tearing down Jewish symbols as two Jewish youths hid inside. No one was injured, but police failed to respond quickly, arriving 40 minutes after the time they were called. A member of the extremist National Bolshevik Party was later arrested in connection with the attack. The investigation was ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report. It is suspected that both events were prompted by the anniversary of Hitler's birthday. Other examples of recent attacks include rocks being thrown through the Kostroma synagogue windows while persons prayed inside on Yom Kippur night in September and December 2003, and vandals who threw rocks through the windows of Bryansk's Jewish school.

Several Jewish cemeteries were desecrated during the reporting period including cemeteries in Bryansk, Ulyanovsk, and Petrozavodsk. In Petrozavodsk, unknown persons sprayed anti-Semitic graffiti on tombstones on the day a local court was to render a decision in another case concerning cemetery desecration. In April, vandals damaged 14 tombstones in Pyatigorsk's Jewish cemetery in Stavropol Oblast. On March 31, a Jewish cemetery was desecrated in Kaluga, and after the local Jewish community Chairman notified the Governor

about the incident, four teenagers and two adults suspected in the vandalism were detained. The four teenagers were released due to their age, and the two adults are still under investigation. In February, several Jewish tombs were desecrated in one of the oldest cemeteries in St. Petersburg and swastikas were painted on the tombstones. In September 2003, an anti-Semitic poster with wires attached to it was found at the Velikiy Novgorod Synagogue, and in October a suspected bomb was found on one of the tombs at the Kostroma Jewish cemetery. In contrast to similar incidents in 2002, both bombs were found to be a harmless imitation. At the end of July 2003, the only Jewish cemetery in Stavropol Kray was desecrated.

There were several new attacks on a synagogue in Kostroma during the reporting period. One Jewish person there was injured during an attack in December 2003. Reportedly teenagers threw stones at the windows and covered the synagogue fence with anti-Semitic inscriptions. Local police doubted they would be able to find the vandals and a local rabbi said the attack was being blamed on hooliganism.

A synagogue in Yaroslavl was attacked in August 2003. Vandals attempted to torch a synagogue and library in Chelyabinsk in February, but neighbors managed to extinguish the fire before the arrival of firefighters. The local Jewish community representatives suspected a local anti-Semitic organization was responsible for the attack. On April 11, a group of young persons threw bottles at a synagogue in Nizhniy Novgorod. The police failed to catch the vandals, and the criminal investigation was dropped on April 22.

In Voronezh, on April 29, two skinheads attacked Aleksey Kozlov outside the headquarters of the Inter-Regional Human Rights Movement of which he is in charge. Kozlov is the regional monitor for anti-Semitism and racism in the country, a project sponsored by the European Commission.

Pyatigorsk Catholic priest Michael Rogers was attacked in his apartment in December 2003. Rogers was injured though he was able to fend off his attackers. The local branch of the FSB joined the criminal investigation started by the local police department. In October 2003, a Catholic cemetery was desecrated in Perm, and the authorities listed Satanists as the main suspects.

Tensions between the ROC and the Vatican continued during the reporting period, despite President Putin's visit to the Vatican in November 2003. The Vatican's decision in 2002 to change the name of the administrative units in Russia to dioceses remained a source of tension. Other issues of concern between the two groups include: the possibility that the Holy See could recognize an Eastern-rite Ukrainian Catholic Patriarchate in Kiev, the ROC's continued negative perception that Roman Catholics proselytize across the country, and a proposal by a local priest to open a small, three-room Catholic Convent whose main mission would be to work with orphans in the city of Nizhny Novgorod. In February, the Nizhniy Novgorod Diocese of the ROC said this decision was considered by the ROC as an "a priori" unfriendly move. The Nizhniy Novgorod Catholic parish insisted that the convent devoted to the Carmelite order was not going to perform missionary activities; however, the ROC argued that the Carmelite Order is known as the Catholic Church's most active missionary order.

In February, Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, met with His Holiness, Alexiy II, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, and the Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, Kirill, who is the president of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of Foreign Ecclesiastical Relations, to engage in ecumenical dialogue between the two Churches. During Kasper's visit, Patriarch Aleksey told the press that the establishment of a Patriarchate in Kiev would ruin Orthodox-Catholic relations for decades. ROC leaders continue to publicly accuse Roman Catholics of coercing the Orthodox faithful into the Catholic Church, in particular, that Roman Catholics have baptized Orthodox orphans.

In March, a lawyer noted that the situation for Protestants in the country has been dramatically worsening for the last 4 years. A Pentecostal prayer center in Moscow Oblast was set on fire in February and similar incidents were reported in Chekhov, Balashikha, Tula, Lipetsk, and Nizhniy Tagil. Local law enforcement agencies have taken no actions in any of the cases.

As a consequence of beatings and the burning of his church building in 2001 by unknown assailants who were never apprehended, an African-born Pentecostal pastor and his

congregation in the Moscow suburb of Chekhov disbanded mid-year in 2003 after continued threats and harassment. Efforts were made to continue using apartments to meet for worship, but gradually the congregation dwindled as a result of pressure. Other African ministers of non-Orthodox Christian churches also experienced prejudicial treatment, based apparently on a combination of religious and racial prejudice.

The SCLJ reported that on January 13 there was an explosion in a Tula Baptist building. The Tula Baptist community believes the incident was a terrorist act, as community members had been receiving threats from unknown persons. The Tula Baptists do not belong to the Russian Union of Evangelical Christian-Baptists and follow the movement of so-called "separated Baptists."

Members of Jehovah's Witnesses are still referred to routinely in the press as a religious "sect," although they have been present in the country for approximately 100 years. A common prejudice circulating among the general public is that members of Jehovah's Witnesses are "spies of imperialism." In January, the governor of Stavropol Kray compared members of Jehovah's Witnesses to Wahhabis, a particularly damning comparison in Stavropol, an area that has been attacked by Chechen separatists.

In May 2003, a meeting of 15,000 members of Jehovah's Witnesses in St. Petersburg was almost disrupted when police initially refused to provide protection against "anticult" activists who protested the event. In response to a request for help, police tried to cancel the event, claiming the group lacked documentation, but ultimately permitted it to take place. There were no reports during the reporting period of continued harassment of members of the group in St. Petersburg.

In December 2003, Yuriy Samodurov, the Director of the Sakharov Center, was served notice that a long-pending case against him and four others for organizing a provocative exhibit of religious art entitled "Danger, Religion" at the Sakharov Center would go to trial. All are charged with inciting religious and ethnic hatred. The January 2003 exhibit roused the ire of the ROC and was defaced on January 18 by six vandals whom police caught at the scene. Upon their arrest, the vandals explained that the exhibition offended their Russian Orthodox beliefs. The vandals were never charged, although just days after the attack, criminal proceedings were initiated against Samodurov and the other four individuals. They face various penalties, including a \$16,700 (484,467 rubles) fine, a 3 to 5 year prison sentence, or being banned from their professions for the next 5 years. The trial began on June 15, at the Tagansky district court in Moscow. An authorized picket in protection of freedom of conscience against state and clerical censorship, and against prosecutions for political and ideological heterodoxy passed opposite the court building the same day. On June 16, the judge sent the indictment back to the Procuracy because of flaws, which it was to fix within 5 days for resubmission. The trial has yet to restart. Aleksiy II, the Patriarch of the ROC, recently issued a general statement that included criticism of the Sakharov Center.

Speakers associated with the ROC took part in antisect conferences and meetings around the country. Aleksandr Dvorkin, Chairman of St. Irineus of Lion Information and Consulting Center, suggested that the status of several registered religious organizations in the country, the Hare Krishnas, Scientologists, and the Unification Church in particular, be reviewed in that they should be banned. Rabbi Berl Lazar suggested that the Government adopt a law prohibiting sect activities and defining which religious organizations are a sect.

Members of some religions continued to face discrimination in their efforts to rent premises and conduct group activities. Religious minorities report both official pressure and personal prejudice as obstacles to renting space. According to Forum 18 and reports from members of Jehovah's Witnesses, confusion over the meaning of the recent ban on the group in Moscow led some landlords to cancel leases.

A continuing pattern of violence, with either religious or political motivations, against religious workers in the North Caucasus was evident during the period covered by this report. Foreign religious workers have been deterred or prohibited from entering war zones in the North Caucasus, and information about religious activity in the area is largely unavailable.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Government continued to engage the Government, a number of religious groups, NGOs, and others in a steady dialogue on religious freedom. The U.S. Embassy in Moscow and the consulate generals in Yekaterinburg, St. Petersburg, and Vladivostok were active throughout the period in investigating reports of violations of religious freedom. U.S. Government officials engaged a broad range of the country's officials, representatives of religious groups, and human rights activists on a daily basis. In the period covered by this report, such contacts included government officials, representatives of over 20 religious confessions, the SCLJ, the Esther Legal Information Center, the Anti-Defamation League, lawyers representing religious groups, journalists, academics, and human rights activists known for their commitment to religious freedom.

The Embassy and consulates have worked with NGOs to encourage the development of programs designed to sensitize law enforcement officials and municipal and regional administration officials to recognize discrimination, prejudice, and crimes motivated by ethnic or religious intolerance. Senior Embassy officials discussed religious freedom with high-ranking officials in the Presidential Administration and the Government, including the MFA, raising specific cases of concern. Federal officials have responded by investigating some of those cases and by keeping Embassy staff informed on issues they have raised. As part of continuing efforts to monitor the overall climate of religious tolerance, the Embassy and consulates maintained frequent contact with working-level officials at the MOJ, Presidential Administration, and MFA.

The Embassy's addresses religious freedom by maintaining a broad range of contacts in the religious and NGO. Two positions in the Embassy's political section are dedicated to human rights and religious freedom issues. These officers work closely with consular and public affairs officers in Moscow and other U.S. Consulates around the country.

Consular officers routinely investigate criminal, customs, and immigration cases involving foreign citizens and attempt to determine whether they involve possible violations of religious freedom. Consular officers also raised the issue of visas for religious workers with the Passport and Visa Unit in the MOI and the MFA. Embassy officers also meet with missionaries during regional travel in the country's interior.

The U.S. Ambassador addressed the theme of religious freedom in public addresses and consultations with government officials. He attended events on major religious holidays and often met with a range of religious leaders. The U.S. Ambassador hosted a Passover Seder for local contacts, and the Consul General in Yekaterinburg hosted an Iftar dinner for Muslim contacts to celebrate Ramadan. Representatives from the Embassy attended trials relating to issues of religious belief and a political officer was present at the delivery of the verdicts against the members of Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow on March 26 and June 16.

The U.S. Government presses for the country's adherence to international standards of religious freedom. Officials in the State Department met regularly with U.S.-based human rights groups and religious organizations concerned about religious freedom, as well as with visiting representatives of Russian religious organizations, the Esther Legal Center, the SCLJ, and members of the State Service Academy that trains regional officials in charge of registering local religious organizations. In May, an officer with responsibilities for the country reports on human rights and religious freedom held meetings in Moscow with officials, members of faith-based organizations, and human rights advocacy groups.

On May 20, members of the Helsinki Commission held a hearing on human rights in Russia. Several members of Congress made statements urging Russia to respect human rights and religious freedom. Witnesses testified about patterns of abuse toward minority, especially Protestant, religions. On June 7, Helsinki Commission staff held a briefing by four Russian human rights advocates. When asked about the status of religious freedom, one replied that the situation is worsening and becoming harsh for all minority religions, even traditional groups, as the Patriarchy seeks identification of Russian Orthodoxy as the State religion.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) works to promote tolerance and human rights. USAID awarded a grant to the Bay Area Council for Jewish Rescue and Renewal to continue promoting its "Climate of Trust" program, which focuses on forming and strengthening Regional Tolerance Councils in Kazan, Ryazan, and Leningrad Oblast. Ethnic

and religious leaders, local government officials, and NGO representatives participate in the Councils; however, in June, a federally targeted program on tolerance and anti-extremism was closed down by the Russian Government ahead of its original 2005 end date. In June 2003, the grantee organized a conference on combating hate crimes in Ryazan for over a hundred students and cadets of the Ryazan branch of the Moscow University of the MVD. Also in June 2003, the grantee organized a conference for a hundred participants in Kazan to focus on relations among diverse religious groups (including Russian Orthodox practitioners, Muslims, and Roman Catholics). Participants attended from the northwest and central regions, the Volga region, and Stavropol, and included ethnic and religious representatives, government officials, and NGO activists.

During the reporting period, USAID supported the Ural NGO Support Center, which worked to encourage public discussion of ethnic and religious tolerance in Perm by working with 58 media outlets to publicize project activities and conduct a training program for journalists to promote more responsible media coverage on racial and ethnic issues. Twenty-seven specialists who received training on tolerance issues have already reached more than 550 teenagers and raised their awareness of interethnic and interreligious issues.

USAID also supported the Volga Humanitarian-Theological Institute in Nizhniy Novgorod, which provided representatives of government and religious organizations with a series of seminars to educate participants and help them focus their thoughts and ideas on religious policy issues. The activity of religious communities in the Volga Federal District increased as a result of this project. For example, in Tatarstan, program participants held a conference on the role of religious organizations in the arena of social policy. Representatives of different religious communities and government officials took part in the conference. The conference aided the different religious organizations in uniting their efforts to assist street children, migrants, and other people in difficult situations. Participants also established a Web site to serve as a virtual resource center for state officials and community leaders. One direct result of the project was further refining of the proposal to change federal legislation concerning the regulation of religion that was submitted to the Committee on Religion Affairs.

The U.S. Government organized exchanges under the International Visitor program with a focus on religious freedom issues during the period covered by this report. A group of mullahs, imams, Islamic journalists, and directors of Islamic cultural centers participated in a U.S. International Visitor program entitled, Promoting Multiculturalism: Islam in the U.S, in June and July of 2003.

During the period covered by this report, the Embassy's Democracy Commission, a small (up to \$24,000—approximately 700,000 rubles) grants program supporting local NGOs pursuing projects related to ethnic, racial, and religious tolerance, approved nine tolerance-related grants totaling approximately \$106,000 (3,074,000 rubles).

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