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Uganda

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, the Government imposed some restrictions.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion; however, local authorities banned some churches suspected of being cults and also some nighttime religious meetings for security reasons. Several members of religious groups suspected of being cults were arrested and detained for illegal assembly.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, the backlash from the killing of more than 1,000 citizens in 2000 at the hands of a religious group resulted in negative public attitudes toward minority Christian groups that are viewed as cults.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of approximately 146,556 square miles, and its population is approximately 23 million. Christianity is the majority religion, and its adherents constitute approximately 66 percent of the population. Muslims account for approximately 16 percent of the population. A variety of other religions, including traditional indigenous religions, Hinduism, the Baha'i Faith, and Judaism, are practiced freely and, combined, make up approximately 18 percent of the population. Among the Christian groups, the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches claim approximately the same number of followers, accounting for perhaps 90 percent of the nation's professed Christians. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, the Baptist Church, the Unification Church, and the Pentecostal Church, among others, are active. Muslims are mainly Sunni, although there also are Shi'a followers of the Aga Khan among the Asian community. Several branches of Hinduism also are represented among the Asian community. There are few atheists.

In many areas, particularly in rural settings, some religions tend to be syncretistic. Deeply held traditional indigenous beliefs commonly are blended into established religious rites or observed alongside such rites, particularly in areas that are predominantly Christian.

Missionary groups of several denominations are present and active in the country, including the Pentecostal Church, the Baptist Church, the Church of Christ, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

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, the Government imposed some restrictions.

All religious organizations are required to register with the Nongovernmental Organizations Board. The Government continued to refuse to grant registration to the World Last Message Warning Church, an apocalyptic cult under suspicion following the 2000 cult killings of more than 1,000 citizens; however, in February 2002, criminal charges against the group's leader were dropped for lack of evidence. There were no reports that the Government refused to grant such registration to any other religious organization.

The Political Organizations Act, which was implemented in June 2002, imposes restrictions on the registration and organization of political parties and organizations; it precludes the formation of such entities if membership is based exclusively on sex, race, color, ethnic origin, tribal birth, creed, or religion.

Missionary groups face no restrictions on their activity. Foreign missionary groups, like foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGO's), must register with the Government. There were no reports that the Government refused to grant registration to any foreign missionary groups.

Permits also are necessary for the construction of facilities, including religious facilities. There were no reports that the Government refused to grant such permits to any religious organization.

Private Koranic and Christian schools are common. There is no religious instruction in public schools.

Prisoners are given the opportunity to pray on days appropriate to their faith. Muslim prisoners usually are released from work duties during the month of Ramadan.

Religious holidays celebrated as national holidays include Idd-Adhuha, Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Some local governments have restricted the hours of operation of religious organizations that are viewed as cults. The Government largely has ignored calls for these churches to be shut down and their followers returned to mainstream churches. However, in the wake of discoveries in 2000 that members of a religious group had killed more than 1,000 citizens, several religious organizations were disbanded forcibly. In October 2001, police in Kampala closed Pastor Stephen Wandera's Pentecostal Revival Church following complaints from neighboring residents who suspected the church of being a cult. The Revival Pentecostal Church in Nseko village, Kasangati; a church group based in Hima public school, Busongora; and the Church of the Servants of the Eucharistic Hearts of Jesus and Mary in Bushenyi, which all were shut down in 2000, remained closed at the end of the period covered by this report.

Local authorities banned at least one religious group because it forbade members from seeking medical treatment. On March 7, 2002, the Nebbi Resident District Commissioner (RDC) banned all activities by a religious group called the "Jurwo Ni Mungu," or "Believers in God," following reports that 10 members of the group had died after refusing to seek necessary medical treatment. On March 13, those arrested were charged with unlawful assembly and remanded to prison pending trial. On March 13, Otuga Regenaro, the group's leader, also was arrested for unlawful assembly; he remained in prison pending trial at the end of the period covered by this report.

The United Methodist Church in Jinja remained closed during the period covered by this report; it had been closed in 2000 following allegations that the church forbade members from seeking medical treatment.

Local authorities also banned some nighttime religious meetings. On September 28, 2001, the RDC for Bushenyi banned night prayers reportedly to eliminate the possibility of rebel recruitment at such meetings. In May 2002, the Deputy RDC's for Masaka and Mukono Districts banned nighttime Bible studies and prayer meetings, reportedly as a result of declining public safety at night in those areas. However, unlike in the past, there were no reports that local officials dispersed meetings of religious groups.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On March 21, 2002, Father Michael Declan O'Toole, an Irish Catholic priest, and two other persons were shot and killed at a military roadblock in Kotido District. On March 23, two soldiers were charged with the killings, and on March 26, they were tried by a court martial tribunal and executed; neither was afforded the right of appeal. The motivation for the killing of Father O'Toole, who frequently criticized the conduct of security forces in the area, was believed to be criminal, rather than religious.

Authorities arrested the members of several religious groups during the period covered by this report. On December 20, 2001, police in Wakiso District arrested the leader and 92 members of the "Ndawula" religious group on charges of unlawful assembly. On December 21, authorities cleared and released 80 of the group members; the remaining 12 subsequently were released on bail pending trial. The group, which has been under suspicion since the 2000 cult killings, was banned from further assembly.

On March 21, 2002, in Kampala, 12 suspected followers of the Katula Kebise Buka religious group were arrested on charges of being idle and disorderly; subsequently, those arrested were released pending trial.

In April 2002, security authorities in Kampala rejected a Muslim request to march through the city to protest Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory. The Muslims agreed to hold a prayer meeting in lieu of a march at a popular venue in downtown Kampala.

Unlike in the past, there were no reports that security officials harassed or detained Muslims; however, many Muslims, particularly members of the Islamic Tabliq group, believe their movements are monitored by security forces.

During the period covered by this report, the Uganda Human Rights Commission issued its investigation report into the 2000 killings in Kanungu of more than 500 followers of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God and the discovery of mass graves of approximately 500 other persons; the report suggested that Joseph Kibwetere was not the leader of the group, but provided little new information. The Commission of Inquiry remained unable to complete its work because of lack of funding. Reverend Francis Mutazindwa, the former Assistant RDC of Rukungiri who failed to act on information about the activities of the Kanungu cult, remained on bond awaiting the Commission's findings.

There were no developments in the 2000 case of Innocent Bitungwabariho, a leader of the Jesus Christ the King of Salvation church, who remained in detention on charges of child neglect, unlawful assembly, and being idle and disorderly after confining his family to their house for 5 years to prevent them from being exposed to sin. There also were no developments in the 2000 case involving five members of the Kisaaba Redeemed Church in Kayunga, Mukono district—Benon Kaye, Monica Isabirye, Eseza Kisakye Lukwago, Catherine Nagujja, and Willinstone Nagenda—who were arrested and charged with causing the death of a church member by denying him medical treatment. Kaye and Isabirye were released on bail, and the other members were freed. There were no developments in the 2000 case involving five members of the Mulungiomu Full Gospel Church in Luweero—John Mwebaza, Florence Mirembe, Fred Mwesigwa, Sarah Mugabi, and Geoffrey Beyongera—who remained in custody at Luzira prison after reportedly telling their followers to fast and sell their property.

On February 4, 2002, the Director of Public Prosecutions withdrew for lack of evidence the charges of defilement, rape, abduction, and theft in the 1999 case against Wilson Bushara, leader of the World Last Message Warning Church, and his followers.

During the period covered by this report, Nabi Besweri Kiswabuli, the apostle of the Issa Massiya religious group in Iganga district, was released from prison after an investigation cleared him of any wrongdoing in the 1999 assault and injury of Daniel Tusubira, a former follower.

During the period covered by this report, 22 of the 38 members of the Islamic Tabliq group, who were arrested in 1995 on treason charges, were released for lack of evidence. The other 15 members remained in detention on treason charges after refusing the Government's offer of amnesty. The Government reportedly is pursuing its case against the 15 for terrorism; however, some members of the group still maintain that they are being held for religious reasons.

Forced Religious Conversion

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

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. However, the backlash from the 2000 killing of more than 1,000 citizens at the hands of a religious group resulted in negative public attitudes toward fringe Christian groups (see Section II). Some officials of "mainstream" Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim religious organizations have called for the closure of Christian churches that are viewed as cults.

During the period covered by this report, the Religious Efforts for Teso and Karamoja Reconciliation, a new religious initiative to reduce ethnic conflict in the northeastern part of the country, was created. The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, an interfaith organization of Catholic, Muslim, Anglican, and other Christian leaders in northern Uganda, increased its efforts to find a peaceful resolution to the 17-year conflict between the Government and the Lord's Resistance Army. In 2001 the heads of the Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, and Islamic faiths organized an Interreligious Council, which was incorporated formally during the period covered by this report; the organization aims to strengthen interreligious dialog among the main religious groups and to advocate on social issues of concern to all groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. U.S. Government and Embassy representatives met with leaders of various religions during the period covered by this report.

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