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Liberia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 43,000 square miles and a population of 3.5 million.

According to the 2008 National Population and Housing Census, Christians represent 85.5 percent of the population, Muslims 12.2 percent, adherents of indigenous religious beliefs 0.5 percent, and other religions 0.1 percent, with 1.5 percent claiming no religion. There are small numbers of Baha'is, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists. Many religious groups incorporate elements of indigenous religious beliefs. Christian groups include Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and AME Zion denominations, and a variety of Pentecostal churches. Many of the churches are affiliated with churches outside the country, while others are independent.

Christians live throughout the country. Muslims belong mainly to the Mandingo and Vai ethnic groups. Mandingos reside throughout the country, while Vais live predominantly in the west. The country is also home to a Fula community, who are predominantly Muslim, some of whom have acquired citizenship. Ethnic groups in all regions participate in the indigenous religious practices of secret societies, such as the Poro (for men) and Sande (for women). Secret societies teach traditional customs and skills to initiate youth into adulthood. In some cases Sande societies practice female genital mutilation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The law does not discriminate based on religion regarding citizenship and residency, but there was evidence that applications for documentation from Mandingos and Fulas received greater scrutiny than from citizens of other indigenous tribes.

High-level government officials were required to take an oath when assuming their new offices. Christians kissed the Bible and Muslims the Qur'an on those occasions.

Government ceremonies opened and closed with prayers. The prayers were usually Christian but occasionally were both Christian and Muslim.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter and Christmas.

Some Muslim leaders believe that certain Islamic holy days should also be national holidays. The government mandated that public businesses and markets, including Muslim businesses and shops, remain closed on Sundays and major Christian holy days, an issue that Muslim leaders in the past brought unsuccessfully to the National Legislature and the Supreme Court. There was no legal requirement to excuse Muslims from employment or classes for Friday prayers, although some employers did so.

All organizations, including religious groups, must register their articles of incorporation with the government, along with organizations' statement of purpose. Registration was routine, and there were no reports that the registration process was burdensome or discriminatory. The government did not require indigenous religious groups to register,

and they generally did not.

Public schools offered religious education, particularly Christian education, but did not require it. The government subsidized private schools, most of which were affiliated with either Christian or Muslim organizations.

There were reports of ritualistic killings (the act of killing for body parts for use in traditional rituals) from all parts of the country. The government treated ritualistic killing cases as homicides, and investigated and prosecuted them accordingly; however, lack of community cooperation and credible witnesses generally hampered investigations.

An alleged ritualistic killing in Harper, Maryland County, in March 2010 prompted the county superintendent to hire a witchdoctor to investigate the murder. The witchdoctor named 18 suspects, whom authorities then detained. The minister of justice intervened to bring the case into the formal justice system.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. However, despite frequent interaction between Christians and Muslims, some tension existed, and in one case, became violent. A suspected ritualistic killing of a Christian girl whose body was found near a mosque in Lofa County on February 26, 2010, led to rioting in and around Voinjama, the county seat, between predominantly Christian Lormas and predominantly Muslim Mandingoes, resulting in four deaths and numerous injuries. Religious sites were specifically targeted; two mosques, three churches, and a Catholic school were damaged.

The Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL) promoted dialogue among various religious communities. A delegation from the IRCL traveled to Voinjama in March 2010 to investigate the causes of the riots and assist in the reconciliation process. The vice president also led a delegation of legislators and government officials to investigate the roots of the conflict.

On August 29, 2009, members of a presidential task force charged with cleaning up Monrovia used batons to disperse Muslim vendors who had set up food stalls near the Benson Street Mosque for the Ramadan celebration. The vendors perceived this as an attack on their religion, although the task force had used similar methods in other campaigns. On August 30, President Sirleaf apologized for the incident and disbanded the task force. Sirleaf and the acting mayor of Monrovia, who also headed the task force, visited the mosque on September 1 and met with Muslim leaders, apologized for the incident, and reassured the Muslim leaders that the government respected all religious groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The ambassador and other embassy officers expressed support for religious freedom and pluralism at interfaith meetings.

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