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Rwanda

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. Local government officials detained Jehovah's Witnesses for refusing to participate in security patrols, however in a smaller number of cases than during the previous reporting period.

There was an improvement in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, as there were fewer reports of local authorities harassing and detaining members of Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses continued to experience difficulty in obtaining permission to build Kingdom Halls (places of worship) in some localities, particularly in Gitarama.

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

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy officers met regularly with religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 10,169 square miles and a population of approximately 9 million. The Government reported on November 1, 2006, that 56.5 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 26 percent Protestant, 11.1 percent Seventh-day Adventist, 4.6 percent Muslim, 1.7 percent claims no religious affiliation, and 0.1 percent practice traditional indigenous beliefs. This study indicates a 6.9 percent increase in the number of Catholics and a 17.9 percent decline in the number of Protestants (which can in large part be explained by breaking out the growing Seventh-day Adventist church separately) from the 2001 survey figures. The figures for Protestants include the growing number of members of Jehovah's Witnesses (about 14,000) and evangelical Protestant groups. There is also a small population of Baha'is. There has been a proliferation of small, usually Christian-linked schismatic religious groups since the 1994 genocide.

Foreign missionaries and church-linked nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) of various religious groups operated in the country. Foreign missionaries openly promoted their religious beliefs, and the Government welcomed their development assistance.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Constitution prohibits the formation of political organizations based on race, ethnic group, tribe, clan, region, sex, religion, or any other division that may give rise to discrimination. There is no state religion; however, the Constitution includes a provision for a ceremonial oath of office for high-level government officials that makes reference to God.

The penal code provides for small fines and imprisonment of up to 6 months for anyone who interferes with a religious ceremony or with a religious minister in the exercise of his or her professional duties. The law regulates public meetings and calls for fines or imprisonment of violators.

Authorities suspended national registration requirements for religious groups pending passage of a new NGO law that has been under consideration in Parliament since 2003. However, NGOs, religious institutions, and religious organizations must present their objectives and plan of action to local and district authorities for "provisional agreement." At least 112 religious groups received these provisional agreements during the reporting period.

There were reports that numerous religious organizations operated without legal recognition because the process of obtaining it was arduous, which government officials confirmed. Members of unregistered groups were vulnerable to censorship and possible detention. One religious NGO was suspended for operating without legal registration at the

district level, and there appeared to be no official means of appealing suspension.

The Government permits religious instruction in public schools. In some cases students can choose between instruction in "religion" or "morals." In the past missionaries established schools that were operated by the Government. In those schools religious instruction tended to reflect the denomination of the founders, either Catholic or Protestant. There are 12 private Muslim secondary schools, reflecting rapid recent growth in Islamic education.

The Government observes six holy days as official holidays: Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Eid-al-Fitr, All Saints' Day, and Assumption.

Although there were no outward displays of animosity, there were tensions between the Government and the Catholic Church about the role of current and former church officials during the 1994 genocide. Church officials noted that, in a departure from previous ceremonies, at the 2007 genocide commemoration only the Lutheran representative was invited to offer a prayer.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Officials continued to deny building permits for five Kingdom Halls to Jehovah's Witnesses in Gitarama. In May 2006 the mayor of Gitarama notified Jehovah's Witnesses representatives that they would receive permits only if they stopped "inciting citizens to disobey government policy."

The Government requires religious groups to provide advance notification of religious meetings held at night, particularly those ceremonies involving amplified music and boisterous celebrations, due to noise concerns. Religious leaders reportedly cooperated with the Government in limiting nighttime religious meetings and did not view this restriction as an infringement on their religious freedom. The Government continued to require religious groups to hold services at their established places of worship and to ban the use of private homes for this purpose.

Government officials presiding over wedding ceremonies generally required couples to take an oath while touching the national flag, a practice that Jehovah's Witnesses object to on religious grounds. This practice made it difficult for members to marry legally, since they had to find officials willing to perform the ceremony without the flag requirement. Some members found that placing their hands on a Bible on top of the flag was an acceptable alternative.

The Government continued the 2003 suspension of two local organizations, the "Eglise Methodiste Unie au Rwanda" (the United Methodist Church of Rwanda) and the "Communauté Methodiste Union Internationale" (the International Union Methodist Community). Both attempted to register as the primary Methodist group in the country and claimed to be the regional representative of the World Methodist Church, which includes the Rwandan, Kenyan, and Ugandan Methodist Churches. The dispute between the two organizations remained before the High Court at the end of the reporting period.

The Government also continued to suspend the registration of two Pentecostal churches led by foreign pastors. One of the pastors left the country during the reporting period; his church's suspension began in 2004, presumably because of the pastor's alleged immigration irregularities and an ongoing dispute over the naming of his church.

Unlike during prior reporting periods, there were no reports that religious groups changed their locations or tailored their activities to avoid confrontation with authorities due to the citing of religious figures and groups in the 2004 parliamentary report on genocide ideology.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were a total of 48 reports of police detaining, arresting, and in at least 1 instance beating members of Jehovah's Witnesses because the latter refused--due to religious beliefs--to participate in nighttime security patrols.

There were 26 Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned or detained by local authorities for a period of 1 night to 1 month in the last half of 2006 for failure to participate in night patrols. In addition, in April 2007 police arrested five Witnesses in Kigali and held them for up to 2 weeks for refusing to take part in armed night patrols. Also in April, police imprisoned nine Witnesses in Gasabo district for their refusal to participate in night patrols. Despite being informed by the Jehovah's Witnesses' legal representative that they had permission from the Minister of the Interior to decline to take part in night patrols, district officials transferred them to a larger prison for 2 days until senior officials of the Ministry of the Interior intervened. Local authorities held 2 Witnesses in Rulindo District for 3 days, and 3 others in Gatumbo for up to 2 weeks. Officials briefly held three more members at the end of May. One of the three was severely beaten. In 2005 judges ruled that there was no law requiring Jehovah's Witnesses to participate in nighttime patrols.

On May 24, 2007, school authorities in Nyamasheke District expelled three Jehovah's Witnesses children. Jehovah's Witnesses leadership was working for the children's reinstatement at the end of the reporting period.

The six primary students in Nyange District who were expelled in the last reporting period for refusing to attend Christian services in their school returned to classes.

In the case of the member of Jehovah's Witnesses detained and severely beaten by the Executive Secretary of the Kirehe-Kigarama Sector in May 2006, the Government investigated and temporarily detained the official but later released him without charge.

In most districts local officials agreed to allow alternative services, such as community-building projects, in place of night patrols for members of Jehovah's Witnesses. Representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses and government officials often successfully mediated contentious issues.

On October 6, 2006, a court sentenced Father Jean-Marie Vianney Uwizeyeyezu, a Catholic priest who headed a parish in southern Rwanda, to 12 years in prison for "having downplayed the [1994] genocide." In May 2006 authorities arrested and detained Uwizeyeyezu after he allegedly quoted several traditional sayings during Mass that were interpreted as denial of the genocide, which is prohibited by law.

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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The relationship between Jehovah's Witnesses and the Government improved during the period covered by this report. Jehovah's Witnesses officials successfully engaged national and local governments on both specific cases and general issues of contention. The Government responded to reports of Jehovah's Witnesses' detention by local authorities and secured their release. However, there were occasional implementation difficulties and miscommunications between the Government and some local leaders.

There were significantly fewer reports of local authorities harassing and detaining members of Jehovah's Witnesses during the reporting period. Based on revised estimates, there were 102 reports of arrests and detentions in the previous reporting period and 48 such reports during this reporting period.

There was a decline in the number of school children expelled from classes for their religious beliefs.

Improvement in religious freedom for Jehovah's Witnesses was credited to international reporting and to the Government and Witnesses' education of local authorities about the group's beliefs.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

Numerous associations and interfaith groups, such as the Ecumenical Council of Churches and the Protestant Council of Rwanda, contributed to understanding and tolerance among various religious groups.

The Interfaith Commission for Rwanda continued to promote unity and reconciliation by supporting activities such as aid programs aimed at reconciling genocide survivors, released genocide prisoners, and genocide detainees' families. Mufti Saleh Habimana, the leader of the country's Muslim community, led a regional peace-building effort for the Horn of Africa.

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. Embassy officers maintained regular contact with leaders and members of religious communities.

Embassy officers held numerous meetings with members of the Catholic and Anglican Churches, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, leaders of the Muslim community, and evangelical Protestant groups to promote interfaith dialogue and discuss religious freedom. In addition embassy officers regularly met with local and international NGOs involved in peace, justice, and reconciliation efforts that focus on religious tolerance and freedom. As part of its ongoing engagement with the Government on human rights issues, the Embassy identified individual cases of concern to government officials, who subsequently investigated conditions in a few local administrations and acted to improve the situation for members of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

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