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U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Sudan

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The July 9, 2005, Interim National Constitution provides for freedom of religion throughout the entire country, and there was some improvement in the status of respect for religious freedom in the period covered by this report. However, regional distinctions in the constitution, negotiated as part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) have resulted in disparities in the treatment of religious minorities in the North and South. Whereas the Government of Southern Sudan generally respected the rights of Christians and Muslims in the ten states of the south as provided for in its separate constitution, signed on December 5, 2005, the new Government of National Unity (GNU) continued to place restrictions on Christians in the North.

The National Congress Party (NCP) originally came to power in 1989 as the National Islamic Front (NIF); it embraces Islam as the state religion and regards Shari'a as the basis for the country's laws, institutions, and policies. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) resisted these and earlier efforts to Islamicize the country as part of a broader war for southern autonomy through the Government of Southern Sudan, which includes several minority parties. Under the CPA, these two parties entered into a coalition Government of National Unity at the national level, with the SPLM acting as the main governing party in the South. The country remained in a state of political transition, with national elections scheduled for the July 2008 to July 2009 period and a referendum on independence for the South scheduled for 2011.

The new Interim National Constitution preserved Shari'a as a source of legislation in states outside southern Sudan, and recognized "popular consensus" and "the values and the customs of the people of Sudan, including their traditions and religious beliefs," as sources of legislation in the south. The constitution also recognized the national capital of Khartoum as "a symbol of national unity that reflects the diversity of Sudan." According to the constitution, the presidency shall establish the Commission for the Rights of Non-Muslims in the national capital to ensure that non-Muslims are not adversely affected by the application of Shari'a law in Khartoum. The constitution of Southern Sudan also establishes "the traditional laws, religious beliefs, values, and customary practices of the people" as a source of legislation in the south.

The GNU continued to discriminate against Christians in the North, particularly by denying building permits for new churches. The national government required that all students in the North study Islam in school, whether or not they were Muslim, and even if enrolled in private, Christian schools. By the end of the period covered by this report, the presidency had not appointed the Commission for the Rights of Non-Muslims in the national capital.

Relations among religious groups improved during the period covered by this report. Dialogue between Christian and Muslim groups continued under the auspices of the Sudan Inter-Religious Council (SIRC), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) supported by the Government of National Unity, and the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC), comprising Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant groups. The SIRC supported peace and reconciliation efforts between Christians and Muslims, sponsoring a conference on the role of religious leaders in peace building with the U.S. Institute of Peace in July 2005 and hosting an interfaith prayer service during the archbishop of Canterbury's visit to the country in February 2006.

The United States government promoted religious freedom and human rights in Sudan in its discussions with government officials and in its public diplomacy. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) also funded efforts to promote inter-religious dialogue and understanding. The United States government encouraged the GNU to fulfill the promises of religious freedom made in the CPA and the Interim National Constitution, and made clear that restrictions on religious freedom impede improved relations between the two countries. Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick hosted an interfaith forum with Christian and Muslim leaders in Khartoum during his November 2005 visit. Embassy officials frequently met with leaders of different religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

Sudan has an estimated population of 41 million and an area of 967,500 square miles. Exact population and demographic data were unavailable due to the long civil war, and there were no recent census figures. An estimated two-thirds to three-fourths of the population lived in the fifteen states of the North and were generally from Arabic-speaking Semitic groups. The remaining one-fourth to one-third of the population lived in the South and were mostly Nilotic peoples, some of whom have adopted English as a common language. More than four million internally displaced persons (IDPs) fled from the South to the North during the long civil war. Although several hundred thousand returned to the South after the CPA, many more still lived in and around northern cities.

Precise religious data were not available; self-reported membership totals in particular religious groups could not be confirmed, and outdated census figures may not be accurate. In general Islam predominated in the North, while traditional indigenous beliefs (animism) and Christianity were prevalent in the South. Some Muslim leaders estimated the country's Muslim population to be more than thirty-two million, or above 80 percent of the total population; almost all Muslims in the country were Sunni, with a small Shi'a community, although there were significant distinctions between followers of different Islamic traditions. The most significant divisions within the Sunni community occurred along the lines of the Sufi brotherhoods. Two popular brotherhoods, the Ansar and the Khatmia, were associated with the opposition Umma and Democratic Unionist Parties, respectively.

Traditionalists were believed to be the second largest religious group in the country, although there were reports that many had converted to Christianity or followed a syncretic form of these two faiths. Christians were generally considered the third largest group. The Roman Catholic Church estimated the number of baptized Catholics at six million, including small Melkite and Maronite communities in the north. Anglicans estimated five million followers in the Episcopal Church of Sudan and the dissident Reformed Episcopal Church. There were small but long established groups of Orthodox Christians in Khartoum and other northern cities, including several thousand Coptic Orthodox and a few hundred Greek Orthodox Christians. There were significant Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox communities in Khartoum and Eastern Sudan, largely drawn from refugees and migrants. Other Christian groups with smaller followings in the country included the Africa Inland Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Sudan Church of Christ, the Sudan Interior Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Sudan Pentecostal Church, the Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church (in the North), the Presbyterian Church of the Sudan (in the South), and the Seventh-day Adventist Church of Sudan. The size of the country's Jewish community decreased drastically over the past twenty years, when mass emigration led to the closure of the synagogue in Khartoum; however, a small group of Jews still lived in the capital.

The country's traditional division between the Muslim north and the Christian south reflected the social policies of the Anglo-Egyptian colonial administration (1898-1956), under which Christian missionary activity was encouraged in the South but restricted in the North, while the spread of Islam was tolerated in the North but prohibited in the South. Though these policies were no longer in effect, they continue to influence the country's religious demography. The GNU officially permits foreign missionary groups in both North and South, although in practice Christian missionaries were largely confined to the South or to existing Christian communities in the North, due to Shari'a (Islamic law), strong social pressure against proselytizing, and existing laws against apostasy.

With the exception of displaced Southerners, most Christians in the North were descended from remnants of pre-Islamic era communities or trading families that immigrated from Egypt or the Near East before independence (1956); at the same time, many Muslims in the South were shopkeepers or small business owners who sought economic opportunities during the civil war. These tensions have created not only a sense of ethnic and religious marginalization among the minority religious group in each region but also a feeling among the majority that a minority group controlled a disproportionate share of the wealth.

Religion also played a role in the country's political system. Northern Muslims have dominated the country's political and economic system since independence. The National Congress Party (NCP) drew much of its support from Islamists, Wahhabis, and other conservative Arab Muslims in the north; the Umma Party traditionally attracted Arab followers of the Ansar Sect of Sufism as well as non-Arab Muslims from Darfur and Kordofan. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) included both Arab and non-Arab Muslims in the North and East, especially those followers of the Khatmia Sect of Sufism, as well as some northern Arabic-speaking Christians. Southern Christians generally supported the SPLM or one of the smaller southern parties.

The ongoing conflict in Darfur between the government-backed Arab Muslim militias (janjaweed) and non-Arab Muslim rebels did not center on religious differences but rather on political, economic, and ethnic issues.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Religious groups are required by law to register with the government as non-governmental organizations, although this requirement did not appear to be enforced. Religious organizations that do not register as non-governmental, non-profit organizations, cannot legally claim exemption from taxes and import duties. Some of the largest Christian religious groups have historically refused to register out of fear of government interference. Religious groups that have opted to register, such as the Coptic Church, have been exempt from property taxes.

The April 2006 Humanitarian and Voluntary Work Act requires all foreign NGOs, including religious groups, to register with the Government. It ostensibly applies to both Christian and Muslim groups, but there has been insufficient time to see how it is applied in practice. In prior years, the SCC had complained that a similar act, which this one supersedes, was unfairly applied.

The new Interim National Constitution that took effect on July 9, 2005, provides for freedom of worship throughout the entire country; the constitution of Southern Sudan, signed on December 5, 2005, also provides for freedom of worship in the ten states of the South. Although the GNU did not directly interfere in the right of citizens to practice the religion of their choice, it restricted to some extent when, where, and how Christians in the North were permitted to worship. The Government of Southern Sudan generally respected the rights of southerners to practice the religion of their choice.

The country's legal and policy framework affecting religious freedom changed dramatically following the CPA. Although the Interim National Constitution applies to the entire country, it has in effect created separate legal systems in the North and the South.

Shari'a is a source of legislation in the fifteen states of the North. Conversion from Islam to another religion is considered apostasy. Under the CPA, non-Muslims in Khartoum are exempt from penalties prescribed by Shari'a but not from national and state laws based on Shari'a. In addition, the rights of non-Muslims in the capital are to be guaranteed by a special presidential commission, which is expected to assist the government in advising courts on how to apply Shari'a law to non-Muslims. On January 3, 2006, the president announced his intention to create the Commission for the Rights of Non-Muslims in the National Capital; however, by the end of the period covered by this report there had been no presidential decree to create this Commission.

Shari'a is no longer a source of legislation in the ten states of the South under the Interim National Constitution and the constitution of Southern Sudan. The region's legal and regulatory framework remains a combination of inherited national law, laws adopted by the Government of Southern Sudan, traditional practice, and provisional decisions.

The Government of Southern Sudan has established a special court in Juba, the Southern capital, for prosecuting crimes committed for religious reasons, particularly by Christians seeking revenge against Muslims. There were reports that the court has tried several cases, and the Muslim leaders in Juba stated that it appeared to offer adequate protection to Muslims. There was no equivalent institution in the North.

Under the Interim National Constitution, Sudan is a "multi-religious state" and "an all embracing homeland wherein...religions exist in harmony"; moreover, the constitution is based on the principle that the country's "religions, beliefs, customs, and traditions are a source of moral strength and inspiration for the Sudanese people." However, because the constitution preserves the role of Shari'a in the north, it effectively establishes Islam as the state religion in that region. Neither the Interim National Constitution nor the constitution of Southern Sudan establish a state religion in the South, although traditionalism and Christianity are dominant. All courts in the South are secular.

National government offices and businesses in the north follow the Islamic workweek, with Friday as a day of prayer. Employers are required by law to give their Christian employees two hours before 10:00 a.m. on Sunday for religious purposes, but many employers did not, and there was no legal remedy. Public schools are in session on Sunday and Christian students are not excused from classes. Most Christians instead worship on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday evenings.

Government of Southern Sudan offices and businesses in the south follow the western workweek, with Sunday as a day of religious observance. Employers in the South generally do not give their Muslim employees two hours on Friday for religious purposes as required under national law practiced in the North. Schools in the South are in session on Friday, and Muslim students are not excused from class.

The Government recognizes Eid al-Adha, Islamic New Year, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Orthodox Easter, Sham El Naseem/Easter Monday, Israa Wal Mi'Raaj, Eid al-Fitr, and Christmas as public holidays throughout the country. In the South, Islamic holy days were generally not observed by government offices.

There are no restrictions on religious groups' ability to acquire property, but all groups are required to obtain permits from the national Ministry of Guidance and Endowments, the state Ministry of Construction and Planning, and the local planning office before constructing new houses of worship. However, this requirement did not appear to be enforced in the South. Enforcement in the North was sporadic and not as strict as it was several years ago. Permits for new mosques in the North are generally issued, although Muslim leaders complained the process was cumbersome and time-consuming. Moreover, according to Christian leaders, permits for new churches have been either denied outright or delayed for years. However, according to the SIRC, the Khartoum State Ministry of Planning and Public Utilities issued a permit for a new Episcopal church at Al Hazari, Khartoum, on July 23, 2005, and a permit for a new Church of Christ place of worship at Al Thawra, Omdurman, on May 24, 2006; these appeared to be the first permits issued for a new church since 1975. The ministry was also reported to be in the process of approving other permits, including one for a Catholic church at Al Bakara, Khartoum. However, other obstacles remained, including a group of squatters preventing work on the new Episcopal church site at Al Hazari, and many Christian leaders remained skeptical that the Government would allow new churches to be built.

Foreign missionary groups are required to register with the government, although Christian leaders charged that foreign Muslim groups are routinely exempt from this regulation.

Under the state-mandated curriculum, all schools in the North--including private schools operated by Christian groups--are required to teach Islamic education classes from preschool through university. In addition, all classes must be taught in Arabic, although English may be taught as a foreign language. Some public schools excuse non-Muslims from Islamic education classes, but others do not. Private schools must hire a special teacher for teaching Islamic education, although public schools are not required to provide any religious instruction to non-Muslims.

The educational system in the South suffered from the effects of the civil war. There were few public schools; most instruction was provided by Christian religious groups, although there were two Islamic colleges. The University of Juba, which relocated to Khartoum during the North-South Civil War, remained in the capital, although a majority of its students came from the South. The Government of National Unity has promised to return the University to Juba in time, although there has been little progress to date.

The Government of National Unity has supported interfaith dialogue through the SIRC. Though the SIRC is officially an NGO, the government provides much of its funding. In July 2005 the SIRC together with the U.S. Institute of Peace sponsored a conference on the role of religious leaders in peacekeeping. It also hosted an interfaith prayer service in February 2006 in honor of the archbishop of Canterbury's visit to Khartoum, which was attended by senior government officials.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The GNU restricted where Christians in the North were permitted to worship and how they were permitted to practice. Obtaining permits to build new churches remained a long and tortuous process, despite recent improvements. There were still several outstanding requests from previous years, and it was not clear whether any new permits were requested during the reporting period. In addition, according to some Christian leaders, the GNU had pressured existing churches in central Khartoum to move to less conspicuous locations on the outskirts of the capital, and it preferred to keep new Christian facilities outside the city center. Some Christians believed this approach to be a less public, less confrontational alternative to the previous government's practice of confiscating church property.

The GNU promoted the spread of Islam through mandatory Islamic education for all students in the North, even non-Muslims enrolled in private, Christian schools. Christian leaders believed that these requirements not only exacerbated problems in the relationship between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority but further marginalized the place of Christianity in northern society. The Catholic Church in particular faced a shortage of priests, which it attributed to a lack of Christian religious education. At the same time, the Government continued to restrict conversions from Islam to other faiths, which is officially considered apostasy. On May 14, 2006, an Episcopal priest and three other Christians were arrested after meeting with a

Muslim woman who wanted to convert to Christianity. They were released after several days.

The Government of Southern Sudan pursued policies that contributed to the free practice of religion during the period covered by this report, although some Muslims leaders in the south expressed concerns about the Government's treatment of Muslims. In January 2006 the government of Upper Nile State banned the use of public loudspeakers at mosques in Malakal and Nasir for announcing the call to prayer, claiming that they disturbed the public. The state government has reclaimed the property of the Nasir Islamic Qur'an Institute, which was seized by the national government several years ago from a Christian group; the government of Central Equatoria State took a similar action in March 2006 against Qur'an al-Karim University, formerly Juba Girls' Secondary School. The Upper Nile State Ministry of Finance has closed Islamic banks in Malakal, citing the CPA's provisions for the establishment of a conventional banking system in the South.

Although the GNU has not banned any specific religious group, it favored Islam over Christianity in the North. Many southern Christians living in the North suffered from social, educational, and job discrimination, although religion was only one of the many factors leading to discrimination. Muslim religious organizations affiliated with opposition political parties, such as the Al-Ansar and its political wing, the Umma National Party, also claimed to suffer discrimination by Islamists in the governing National Congress Party, although it was unclear whether the alleged discrimination was due to religious or political affiliation. Some Muslims in the North also complained that the GNU was attempting to curry favor with the West by placing Christian leaders, including a dissident Episcopal bishop and a prominent Coptic Orthodox priest, in high positions of power within the government. According to these allegations, these Christian officials used their power to reward their followers by directing government contracts and other business to their followers' companies.

Muslims in the South complained of economic discrimination and boycotts by Christians, although such actions did not appear to be supported by the Government of Southern Sudan. During the August 1, 2005, riots, after the death of First Vice President John Garang, Muslim-owned businesses were burned down in Juba. Muslims in Juba were intimidated, threatened, and harassed to leave Juba. The SPLM issued statements against violence towards Muslims in Juba. Tensions remained in Juba with many Muslims believing they were unwanted there despite their long presence in the area that predated independence. The most common complaint from Muslims in the South was late-night threats and racial epithets from inebriated Christian southerners who equated Islam with northern oppression during the long civil war.

The Government continued to refuse to act on many applications to build new churches in the North, although it issued two permits for new churches in suburban Khartoum during the period covered by this report. The need for new church facilities is particularly great in IDP camps on the outskirts of Khartoum, where southern Christians fled during the civil war. Most existing churches in the capital date from the colonial era and are located near the city center. As a result, relatively few Christians have the time or means to travel over twenty miles to church during their two hours of "religious time" on Sunday mornings. This policy not only discourages Christians from practicing their faith, but also enables the government to publicly claim that new churches are not needed because the existing ones are under-utilized.

Some Christians living in IDP camps have established their own congregations and built "prayer houses" without obtaining permits, though these facilities have been subject to Government condemnation and destruction in the past. The Catholic Church routinely builds "activity centers" near IDP camps which function as churches, though without official permits.

Though the Government has issued two permits for new churches in suburban Khartoum, some Christian leaders believe the GNU has continued the previous regime's attempts to drive churches and other Christian institutions out of the capital's center. Previous governments routinely confiscated church property in the city, most notably the former All Saints Episcopal Cathedral (1971) and the Catholic Club (1998). Episcopal Church of Sudan officials alleged that the NCP government prompted the 2004 sale of the Church's Khartoum headquarters and guesthouse by a dissident Episcopal bishop. According to Episcopal and Catholic officials, the Government has yet to provide adequate compensation for all confiscated church property, though the Sudan Inter-Religious Council has helped both churches reclaim some properties in Omdurman and suburban Khartoum.

In 2006, some churches in the South received appropriate compensation from the Government of Southern Sudan for property seized by earlier governments. In March 2006, the Archbishop of Canterbury consecrated a new Episcopal cathedral in Renk, replacing an earlier building that had been confiscated to build a new road. Other Christian groups in the South are expected to regain properties currently occupied by the Sudan Armed Forces, the Sudan People's Liberation Army, or various Islamic groups.

Some Christian leaders have accused the GNU of pressuring churches to sell their older properties in central Khartoum by offering them a high sales price, but denying the churches permission to redevelop the properties themselves and take advantage of the booming real estate market. Other church officials allege that once a church has bought land in a particular residential area for possible future construction, the Government will re-zone the area for industrial or commercial use, or plan to build a road through the church's property. These officials see such tactics as the new government's less public, less confrontational alternative to confiscating church property.

Although there is no penalty for converting from another religion to Islam, converting from Islam to another religion is considered apostasy under Shari'a, and is punishable by death in the North. In practice, however, this penalty was rarely carried out. The last case of apostasy was prosecuted in 1985, and involved a Muslim who questioned Muslim beliefs but did not attempt to convert to another religion. Muslims in the North who do attempt to convert to another faith, however, were generally regarded as outcasts by their families and face severe social pressure to recant.

The Interim National Constitution and the constitution of Southern Sudan specifically prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion for candidates for the National Civil Service, though Muslims have traditionally been chosen for these positions over Christians. However, with the creation of the GNU in July 2005, Christians are represented in the Vice Presidential and Cabinet level of the national government for the first time since independence. There has also been a marked increase in the number of Christian members in the National Assembly and the Council of States. There are many Christian lawyers in the North, and several Christian judges for civil law cases involving non-Muslims.

The Interim National Constitution and the constitution of southern Sudan also deny recognition to any political party that discriminates on the basis of religion.

The National Intelligence and Security Service routinely monitored religious activities at mosques and churches throughout the country, often posing as members of the congregations. Christian leaders acknowledge that they usually refrain from preaching on political or other sensitive topics to avoid harassment by the authorities. Some Muslim imams prefer to avoid political topics in their preaching as well though others seem to show less restraint.

Proselytizing by any religious group in the country is not prohibited, though strong Muslim social pressures in the north against proselytizing and Shari'a penalties for apostasy that are part of the North's legal code, effectively limit Christian missionary activities in the region. Some foreign missionary groups operated in the North, though their work is officially limited to education or services to southern Christian IDPs. Missionaries also continued to operate in the South, running relief operations, medical clinics, and churches. Many Christian religious workers experienced delays in getting visas, though this is common for almost all visa applicants from Western countries. The government also controls travel to certain areas in the North by requiring all foreigners to have travel permits.

There are no formal prohibitions on the local publication, importation, or dissemination of religious texts, and copies of the Qur'an and Bible are commonly available throughout the country, both North and South. Newspapers commonly print sermons and other articles religious, and the Episcopal Church of Sudan operates a religious bookstore in central Khartoum. However, newspaper editors admitted to self-censorship regarding articles on certain controversial topics.

On May 4, 2005, Mohamed Taha, the Shi'a editor-in-chief of Al Wafaq daily newspaper, faced criminal charges of defaming religion when he republished an article with contentious assertions regarding the origins of the Prophet Muhammad. He was detained for a few hours, returned to his job, and was later acquitted. Al Wafaq, which was shut down for a few days, resumed operations.

Public preaching and processions are allowed throughout the country. Muslim sermons are commonly broadcast over loudspeakers in the north, and can be heard well outside the walls of mosques. However, Christian leaders say that they were cautious about preaching outside of their churches, or leading public processions; they usually limit these activities to Christmas and Easter celebrations.

There was little Christian programming in the North, and little local broadcasting of any kind in the South.

Religious symbols are permitted throughout the country. Mosques may announce a call to prayer, though some mosques in the South were no longer allowed to use loudspeakers. Churches could erect crosses on their property and ring bells to announce the beginning of services.

Public schools in the North officially permit Christian students to wear a cross. Although the social pressure for women to wear headscarves in public has decreased, pressure remained for women in universities, both Muslim and non-Muslim, to wear headscarves to classes.

Wine was always used at Catholic Mass in the South; however, it was used infrequently at Mass in the North due to the prohibition on the consumption or sale of alcohol.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In May 2006, there were reports that four Christian leaders, including an Episcopal priest and a Catholic priest, were arrested after meeting with a Muslim woman who wanted to convert to Christianity. All four were denied access to legal counsel for two days; three were beaten by officers of the National Intelligence and Security Service before being released. The woman was not charged with apostasy, but was returned to her family despite some concerns that they would beat her.

Muslims in the North, who express an interest in Christianity, or convert to Christianity, face severe social pressure to recant. Muslim converts to Christianity are typically regarded as outcasts by their families, and are sometimes forced to flee the country. Some Christian converts fear their Muslim families will beat them or report them to authorities for prosecution, though others note that many Muslim families were too embarrassed to draw public attention to the matter.

Forced Religious Conversion

Although there is no evidence of forced conversions in the period covered by this report, there is considerable social pressure for non-Muslims in the North to convert to Islam. The President of the Republic frequently ended his public speeches with a call for victory over the "infidels," and state media outlets routinely referred to Christians as "non-believers." Christian parents reported that their children enrolled in public school were commonly asked why they are not Muslims.

There were reports that Sudanese Armed Forces in the South were rewarding Southerners who convert to Islam and inducing non-Muslims in the military to convert to Islam in advance of the 2011 referendum on Southern independence,

Sudanese law makes a distinction between "orphans" and "children of unknown parents." If a child's parents have died or are no longer able to take care of the child, the child is considered to be of the same religion as his parents. However, if a child's parents are unknown, the child is generally treated as a Muslim, at least in the North. There have been rare cases where Christian families were allowed to adopt Muslim children of unknown parentage, but Christian families must generally adopt children whose parents were known to be Christian.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion 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

There was some improvement in respect for religious freedom in the period covered by this report. The adoption of the Interim National Constitution and the constitution of Southern Sudan removed Shari'a as a source of legislation in the South. The Interim National Constitution also stated that non-Muslims would not be adversely affected by the application of Shari'a law in the North.

Some church property confiscated by previous governments has been returned to its original owners, though many claims remain outstanding. In 2005, the GNU, working through the Sudan Inter-Religious Council, returned St. Catherine's Hospital in Omdurman to the Episcopal Church of Sudan, and gave three plots of land in Khartoum to the Roman Catholic Church as partial compensation for the seizure of the Catholic Club in 1998. The Government has also issued two permits for new churches in suburban Khartoum during the period covered by this report, and is in the process of issuing a third.

In 2006, the Government of Southern Sudan donated land to the Episcopal Church for a new cathedral in Renk, to replace a church that was demolished several years earlier to make way for a new road. The Government of Southern Sudan also prepared to return property seized and used as Islamic colleges in Nasir and Juba to their original Christian owners.

The SPLM also announced in May 2006 that it would press the GNU to act on claims for all outstanding church property issues, including that of the former All Saints Episcopal Cathedral and the Catholic Club in Khartoum.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Religion is an important factor in society, though it often overlaps with other racial, ethnic, and linguistic factors. Nevertheless, relations between individuals of different religious backgrounds were often good on a personal level, though government policy in the past had frequently undermined an atmosphere of religious tolerance. The signing of the CPA and the adoption of the Interim National Constitution marked a change in these policies and contributed to improved relations between Muslims and Christians.

The SIRC played an active role in promoting inter-religious dialogue and understanding. Though the SIRC was officially a NGO, it received much of its funding from the GNU. It includes a forty-six-member General Assembly, with an equal number of Muslims and Christians, which in turn elects a twelve-member Executive Board, also with equal numbers of Muslims and Christians.

The SCC includes twelve Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches in Northern and Southern Sudan. The SCC generally cooperated with the SIRC, though some SCC members have expressed concerns that the SIRC is too close to the government.

Other Christian leaders have expressed reservations about the power of the SIRC to help regain church property, noting that it has had only limited success to date. Some have also expressed concerns with the SCC, complaining that it is prone to corruption and infighting.

Some Muslim leaders are also skeptical that the SIRC truly represents the Muslims of the country, because most Muslim members of the SIRC avoid politics or refrain from criticizing the National Islamic Front and National Congress Party.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The United States government encouraged respect for religious freedom in its discussions with the GNU, and urged it to fulfill the promise of religious freedom made in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the Interim National Constitution. The United States government made clear that continuing restrictions on religious freedom are an impediment to improved relations between the two countries.

U.S. embassy officials met on a regular basis with leaders from many Muslim and Christian groups in Khartoum, Juba, and on trips outside the capital, noting the importance of religious tolerance and the extent of U.S. interest and concern. In addition to this report, the embassy also provided regular updates to the Department of State and other agencies on the state of religious groups in the country, and on the challenges they face.

The embassy's Public Diplomacy section has developed working relationships with a number of Muslim and Christian leaders. A visiting "Islam in America" speaker in late October 2005 expanded contacts with Muslim institutions, and the embassy sponsored a leading Sufi Muslim cleric for the International Visitor Program.

On the occasion of the Deputy Secretary Zoellick's visit in November, the Public Diplomacy section organized a seminal roundtable that brought together leading Muslim and Christian leaders. The embassy also maintains contact with key figures in the country's religious communities through occasional individual meetings and mailings of articles and reports relating to religious freedom.

USAID's Office of Transitional Issues (OTI) provided a grant to the SIRC in 2005 to assist with publication of a booklet on "Religion and the CPA." OTI also provided funding for a dozen seminars that brought together Christian and Muslim leaders to discuss the CPA.

From 1999-2005, the Secretary of State has designated Sudan a Country of Particular Concern annually under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Economic measures in effect against Sudan under the International Religious Freedom Act relate to the use of the voice and vote of the United States to abstain on or oppose loans or other use of the funds of International Financial Institutions to or for Sudan (International Financial Institutions Act).

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