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Congo, Democratic Republic of the

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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The Constitution, approved in a national referendum in December 2005 and formally adopted in February 2006, provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice, provided that worshipers did not disturb public order or contradict commonly held morals.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice; however, there continued to be credible reports that families abandoned or abused a number of children and elderly persons accused of witchcraft.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 905,000 square miles and a population of 65,751,500. Approximately 55 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 30 percent is Protestant, and less than 5 percent each Kimbanguist and Muslim. The remainder largely practices traditional indigenous religious beliefs. There were no statistics available on the percentage of atheists. Minority religious groups include, among others, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Coptic (Orthodox) Christians.

Most religious groups are scattered throughout the country and are widely represented in cities and large towns. Muslims are mainly concentrated in the provinces of Maniema, Orientale, and Kinshasa. Members of the ethnically based spiritual and political movement Bunda dia Kongo reside predominately in Bas Congo.

Foreign missionaries operate freely within the country.

Section II. Status of Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution adopted in 2006 provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full, and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. There is no state religion.

A statutory order on the Regulation of Nonprofit Associations and Public Utilities provides for and regulates the establishment and operation of religious institutions. Requirements for the establishment of a religious organization are simple and generally are not subject to abuse. Exemption from taxation is among the benefits granted to religious organizations. A law regulating religious organizations grants civil servants the power to recognize, suspend recognition of, or dissolve religious groups; however, no one invoked this law in the period covered by this report. Although the law restricts the process of recognition, officially recognized religions are free to establish places of worship and train clergy.

A 2001 decree allows nonprofit organizations, including religious organizations, to operate without restriction provided they register with the Government by submitting a copy of their bylaws and Constitution. The Government requires practicing religious groups to be registered; however, in practice unregistered religious groups operated unhindered.

Although the Government requires foreign religious groups to obtain the approval of the president through the Minister of Justice, foreign religious groups generally operate without restriction once they receive approval from the Government. Many recognized churches have external ties, and the Government generally allowed foreign missionaries to proselytize and did not interfere with their activities.

Public schools permit religious instruction, and religious groups operate many public schools. Religious education is required for all students in religious schools. Parents may choose to send their children to any school, religious or nonreligious.

The Government supported interfaith understanding and consulted with the country's five major religious groups (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Islamic, and Kimbanguist). The Consortium of Traditional Religious Leaders served as an informal forum for religious leaders to gather and discuss issues of concern.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. A Protestant bishop served as president of the transitional Senate, and a Catholic priest as president of the Independent Electoral Commission.

Religious figures were not exempt from violent crimes committed by security forces. For example, in March 2007 military men in uniform shot and killed a Catholic priest in Rutshuru territory in North Kivu. The assailants reportedly entered the convent of Jomba, demanded food and drinks, and then shot the priest, who later died in a Rwandan hospital. The assailants were reported to have been followers of renegade General Laurent Nkunda. The brigade commander promised an inquiry, but no results were made public and no suspects arrested.

Bundu Dia Kongo (BDK), an ethnically-based spiritual and political movement in Bas-Congo province, continued to call for the reestablishment of an "ethnically pure" Kongo kingdom, encompassing sections of the country and also Angola and the Republic of Congo. Members of the separatist group clashed with security forces. For example, on January 31 and February 1, 2007, security forces confronted BDK demonstrators after the demonstrators killed 10 policemen/soldiers and 2 civilians before breaking into government buildings, erecting illegal traffic barricades, and stopping and harassing civilians. This confrontation resulted in more than 100 civilian and security force deaths. In addition, on June 30, 2006, heavily armed soldiers of the national army in the Bas-Congo Province town of Matadi fired indiscriminately at a demonstration by BDK separatists after a BDK member attacked and killed a soldier. The soldiers killed 13 civilians and injured 20. While the security forces responded with excessive force, their reaction was to BDK attacks on civilians, police, and soldiers. Both the United Nations Organization Mission (MONUC) and a National Assembly committee completed investigations on the violence. The MONUC report blamed both sides in the conflict, while the National Assembly had not released its findings to the public by the end of the reporting period.

While the Government generally did not interfere with foreign missionaries, they were not exempt from general restrictions on freedom of movement imposed on all persons by security force members who erected and manned roadblocks, at which they often solicited bribes.

The High Media Authority (HAM) may suspend stations, religious or secular, for hate speech and calls for ethnic violence. During the reporting period, the Government banned all religious radio and television stations from broadcasting political and news programs because these were not consistent with their licenses. In practice the stations did not comply with the ban, and the Government did not sanction them. Unlike in the previous reporting period, there were no reports of the HAM suspending a religious broadcasting station.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In eastern areas of the country, where significant numbers of armed groups remained active, religious freedom was not abused. However, armed groups attacked both religious and nonreligious individuals and institutions as part of the general population. There was no evidence that religion was the motivating factor in any attacks during the reporting period.

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

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 Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice; however, many families continued to accuse children and elderly persons of practicing witchcraft and to drive them from their homes.

As in past reporting periods, there were reports of incidents in which individuals attacked, tortured, killed, or drove from their homes individuals suspected of witchcraft. There is a common belief in the region that some persons have the power to cast spells on others; accusations of witchcraft can cause widespread fear in a community. There continued to be reports that leaders of certain revival churches or small evangelical Protestant churches exploited fear of witchcraft by either encouraging families to drive accused witches from their homes or performing costly and painful exorcisms in which victims may be locked in boxes for long periods of time, starved for several days, or receive other harsh treatment.

There were reports of adults killing children accused of sorcery. For example, a father in the Equateur Province town of Zongo threw his 5-month-old baby into a river in September 2006 for alleged sorcery, resulting in the baby's death. Days earlier adults in the provincial capital of Mbandaka threw a 15-year-old boy in the river for sorcery, resulting in the boy's death. Police made arrests in both cases. Officials did not charge, prosecute, or punish anyone for similar crimes reported in previous reporting periods.

Leaders of major religions consulted with one another through the Consortium of Traditional Religious Leaders.

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. U.S. embassy officials regularly met with religious leaders throughout the country.

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