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Cote d'Ivoire

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, since the 2002 rebellion, the Government has targeted suspected rebels and rebel sympathizers among whom there are many Muslims.

The Government is facing its greatest political crisis since independence following the September 2002 failed coup attempt and mutiny that led to a de-facto division of the country. After the onset of the crisis, the Government cracked down on persons perceived to be associated with the rebellion; the crackdown particularly affected people of northern origins, many of whom were Muslims, who were presumed to be supporters of the rebellion. In January 2003, all major parties to the crisis signed the Linas-Marcoussis Accord (LMA), which aimed to end the crisis and bring about national reconciliation. There was halting progress on LMA implementation during the period covered by this report.

The status of respect for religious freedom improved somewhat during the period covered by this report. Unlike during the crisis, there were no reports that security forces killed Muslim leaders. While the conflict exacerbated political and, at times, ethnic divisions, religion was not a significant factor in the crisis. The establishment of a Ministry of Religion in March 2003 highlighted the Government's efforts to deal with religious strains.

Relations among the various religious groups were at times strained as a consequence of the national crisis; however, strong efforts by religious and civil society groups have helped prevent the political crisis from turning into a religious conflict. There is some societal discrimination against Muslims and followers of traditional indigenous religions.

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 a total area of 124,500 square miles, and its population is approximately 18 million. Religious groups in the country include Muslims, Christians, practitioners of traditional indigenous religions, and others. Churches include the Roman Catholic Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Assemblies of God, the Southern Baptist Church, the Autonomous Church of Celestial Christianity of Oschoffa, the Union of the Evangelical Church of Services and Works of Cote d'Ivoire, the Unification Church, the Harrist Church (an African Protestant denomination founded in the country in 1913 by a Liberian preacher named William Wade Harris), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Protestant Methodist Church of Cote d'Ivoire, the Coptic Church, the Pentecostal Church of Cote d'Ivoire, the Interdenominational Church, the Yoruba First Church, the Church of God International Missions, and the Baptist Church Missions. Other religions include Buddhism, the Baha'i Faith, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Dehima, the Church of the Prophet Papa Nouveau (a syncretistic religion founded in the country in 1937 that combines Christian doctrine, traditional indigenous rituals, and practical concern for social, political, and economic progress for Africans), the Messianic Church, Bossonism (the traditional religious practices of the Akan ethnic group), the Limmoudim Church, the Church of Jesus (a small Christian group, the origins of which are unknown), the Eckankar Church, the Church of the Holy Spirit (a syncretistic religion founded in 1965 in Nigeria that sees human passion as an obstacle to uniting a person's divine qualities), and the Movement of Raelis. Many religious groups in the country are associated with U.S. religious groups.

The most recent national census, conducted in 1998, indicated that for citizens and noncitizens, Muslims made up approximately 38.6 percent of the country's resident population; Catholics, 19.4 percent; practitioners of traditional indigenous religions, 11.9 percent; Protestants, 6.6 percent; other Christians, 3.1 percent; practitioners of other religions, 1.7 percent; Harrists, 1.3 percent; and persons without religious preference or affiliation, 16.7 percent. Among citizens only, 27.4 percent were Muslim, 20.8 percent were Catholic, 15.4 percent practice traditional indigenous religions, 8.2 percent were Protestant, 3.4 percent were of other Christian affiliations, 1.9 percent practiced other religions, 1.6 percent were Harrist, and 20.7 percent were without religious affiliation.

Foreigners living in the country are 70.5 percent Muslim and 15.4 percent Catholic with small percentages practicing other religions.

Most of the country's many syncretistic religions are forms of Christianity that contain some traditional indigenous practices and rituals. Many such religions were founded by local or other African prophets and are organized around and dependent upon the founder's personality. Some emphasize faith healing or the sale of sacred objects imbued with supernatural powers to bring health and good luck. Many nominal Christians and Muslims practice some aspects of traditional indigenous religions, especially in difficult times.

Generally practitioners of traditional religions have followed a trend towards conversion to Christianity and Islam. Missionary work, urbanization, immigration, and higher education levels have led to a decline in the percentage of practitioners of traditional religions from 37 percent in 1975 to 11.9 percent in 1998.

Muslims are found in the greatest numbers in the northern half of the country, although they also are increasingly numerous in the cities of the South, West, and East due to immigration, migration, and interethnic marriages. In 1998 Muslims composed 45.5 percent of the total urban population and 33.5 percent of the total rural population. Catholics live mostly in the southern, central, and eastern portions of the country, although recently some animists in the north have converted to Catholicism. Practitioners of traditional indigenous religions are concentrated in rural areas of the country's North, West, Center, and East. Protestants are concentrated in the central, eastern, and southwest regions. Members of the Harrist Church are concentrated in the South.

Political and religious affiliations tend to follow ethnic lines. Since population growth and movement have accentuated ethnic distinctions between the groups of the Sahel and those of the forest zone, those distinctions sometimes have been expressed in terms of religion such as northern Muslims and southern Christians and traditionalists.

Immigrants from other parts of Africa generally are at least nominally Muslim or Christian. The majority of foreign missionaries are European or U.S. representatives of established religions, but some Nigerians and Congolese also established churches.

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 favored some religious groups. Although there is no state religion, the Government informally favors Christianity for historical and ethnic reasons.

Beginning with the 2001 Forum for National Reconciliation, the Government initiated several programs aimed at improving relations between the Government and religious groups. However, some Muslims believe that their religious and ethnic affiliation makes them targets of discrimination by the Government with regard to both employment and the renewal of national identity cards.

In past years, the Government paid for the construction of Catholic cathedrals; however, the Government recently sponsored the construction of shrines for groups other than the Catholic Church. During the period covered by this report, the Government directed the construction of the Plateau Mosque in central Abidjan and financed it with the help of governments or

government-affiliated religious organizations of some largely Islamic Arab countries. According to a Ministry of Religion official, there was no significant progress on the mosque construction during the reporting period because funds from Islamic donor countries decreased due to the instability in the country.

The Government recognizes all major Muslim religious holidays and five Christian holidays. The recognized Muslim holy days are the Eid Al-Fitr, Ei Al-Adha, Layla tul-Qadr, and Prophet Muhammad's birthday. The recognized Christian holy days are Christmas, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Pentecost, and All Saints Day.

The law requires religious groups to register with the Government. All religious groups wishing to operate in the country must submit to the Ministry of the Interior a file including the group's bylaws, the names of the founding members, the date of founding (or date on which the founder received the revelation of his or her calling), general assembly minutes, the names of members of the administrative board, and other information. The Ministry of Interior investigates the backgrounds of the founding members to ascertain that the group has no politically subversive purpose. Although nontraditional religious groups, such as public secular associations, are required to register with the Government, no penalties are imposed on a group that fails to register. In practice registration may bring advantages of public recognition, invitations to official ceremonies and events, publicity, gifts, and school subsidies. No religious group has complained of arbitrary registration procedures or problems with gaining government recognition. The Government does not register traditional indigenous religious groups; such groups are not formally organized and none have applied for registration or recognition.

The Government grants no tax or other benefits to religious groups; however, some religious groups have gained some favors after individual negotiations. Examples include reductions in the cost of resident alien registration, customs exemptions on certain religious items, diplomatic passports for major religious chiefs, and, in some cases, privileges similar to those of diplomats. No particular religion is favored consistently in this manner.

Foreign missionaries must meet the same requirements as any foreigner, including registering as resident aliens and obtaining national identification cards. There were no reports that foreign missionaries were denied such registration arbitrarily.

Religious instruction is permitted in public schools and usually is offered after normal class hours. Established Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant groups offer religious instruction. While a 1966 government decree that allowed "only" Catholic and Protestant teachings in schools exists, it no longer is enforced. The Government continued to subsidize both Roman Catholic and other Christian schools, although less than in the past. The Government did not subsidize Muslim schools.

During the period covered by this report, the Government took positive steps to promote interfaith understanding. Government officials, including the President and his religious advisers, appear at major religious celebrations and events organized by a wide variety of faiths and groups. The Government often invites leaders of various religious communities, including the Mediation Committee for National Reconciliation, to attend official ceremonies and to sit on deliberative and advisory committees. However, the Government does not invite traditional indigenous religious groups to the ceremonies or committee meetings.

In November 2003, President Gbagbo met with a group of Muslims at the end of Ramadan. He told them he was sensitive to the concerns of the Muslim community, just as he was sensitive to the concerns of all religious groups in the country. President Gbagbo condemned the actions of those who "manipulate" religion to achieve their political goals.

In September 2003, the Ministry of Religion, in conjunction with the United Nations Population Fund, organized a workshop that sought to promote interfaith cooperation between various religious communities. No action was taken after the workshop.

In April 2003, the Government hosted an international colloquium for West African religions on "The Role of Religions in the Resolution of Regional Conflicts." The colloquium concluded that religion needs to be more a force for cohesion rather than division. The colloquium praised the local religious communities for putting aside their differences and working together for peace.

In March 2003, following the signing of the Marcoussis agreement, the Government created a Ministry of Religion to improve interfaith understanding. The Ministry sought to promote national reconciliation and to help prevent the national crisis from turning into an interethnic and interreligious conflict. The Government created the Ministry to emphasize the secular nature of the state because both Muslim and Christian groups believe the State disproportionately favors the other.

During the period covered by this report, some Muslim leaders claimed that many state institutions, particularly the national television and radio stations, were dominated by Christian programming, including broadcasts of the Catholic Mass, choirs, religious services, and Christian music. Specifically, the Islamic National Council (CNI) and the Muslim community questioned why Catholics had more than 10 radio frequencies, while Muslims had only 1 frequency. However, Muslim leaders appear on state television, and have their own television show.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government monitors minority religious groups for signs of political activity it considers subversive. In the early months of the 2002 crisis, there were credible reports that the Government expanded its surveillance of Islamic associations. There were significantly fewer reports of Government surveillance of religious groups during the period covered by this report.

In the past, the Government informally favored the Roman Catholic Church. Catholic Church leaders traditionally have had a much stronger voice in government affairs than their Islamic counterparts, which has led to feelings of disenfranchisement among some in the Muslim population. President Gbagbo continues to meet with Muslims leaders to discuss their concerns.

Some Muslims believe their religious or ethnic affiliations made them targets of government discrimination with regard to both employment and national identity card renewals. Due to the tense political situation in the country and the ethnic and religious divisions along which political party lines are drawn, some Muslims are scrutinized more closely in the identity card application process. The national identity card issue is contentious as it has not been clear for several years which persons are required to have which card (citizen/non-citizen) and how the cards are to be distributed. As most Muslims share names, style of dress, and customs with several of the country's predominantly Muslim neighboring countries, citizens sometimes are wrongly accused of attempting to obtain nationality cards illegally in order to vote or otherwise take advantage of citizenship. Some noncitizens, particularly from the North, accuse the government of delaying or not processing their naturalization cases. Some people, particularly northerners and foreigners, complain that security forces have harassed them for having the wrong identity cards or not having an identity card. The Marcoussis agreement calls for the resolution of the national identity question and improved implementation of naturalization laws to ensure the granting of citizenship in an equitable manner to those qualified.

Most Muslims in the country are from northern African countries from which there has been substantial immigration into the country. Consequently, government officials and other citizens often treat Muslim citizens like foreigners. For example, northern citizens, who are mostly Muslim, complained that when applying for passports or national identity cards, they were asked to provide more documents than applicants from southern ethnic groups. There were also reports that police officers confiscated or destroyed identity cards of northern citizens, telling northerners they should apply for a "work identity card" (carte de séjour), which is normally given to foreigners only. Also, security forces were more likely to extract bribes at checkpoints from northerners and foreigners than from southern citizens.

Muslims often struggled for state benefits that came more easily to practitioners of other religions. For example, Catholic and Protestant schools are regarded as official schools supervised by the Ministry of Education and subsidized by the Government. The Government allows Islamic schools that follow an official curriculum, but it does not subsidize them.

Some Muslim organizations continue to view the Government's strict financial and organizational requirements for Hajj pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia as unnecessary and unwarranted interference since Churches organize several Christian pilgrimages throughout the year without government supervision. In December 2003, the Islamic Front (FOI) and the

National Trade Union of Couriers asked the Government to liberalize the Hajj process so that pilgrims could organize the trips without Government involvement. A Ministry of Religion official said the Government must be involved in the organization of Hajj as it involves 3,000-4,000 citizens leaving the country each year.

Traditional indigenous religions rarely are included in official or unofficial lists of the country's religions. There is no generally accepted system for classifying the country's diverse traditional religious practices, which vary not only by ethnic group, but also by region, village, family, gender, and age group. In addition members of the country's largely Christian or Islamic urban elite, which effectively control the State, generally seemed disinclined to allow traditional indigenous religions the social status accorded to Christianity and Islam. For example, no traditional indigenous religious leader (except for traditional rulers, whose responsibilities as rulers required them to perform some traditional religious functions) received an invitation to present New Year's greetings to the President or to take part in a government advisory council. However, traditional Akan chiefs very often were invited to participate in traditional libation ceremonies aimed at recognizing ancestors at the beginning of important ceremonies.

The Government does not prohibit links to foreign coreligionists but it informally discourages connections with politically radical fundamentalist movements, such as Islamic groups based in Iran or Libya.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In October 2003, Minister of Security Martin Bleou announced that the Government discovered a plot to kill Abidjan Cardinal Bernard Agre, but did not say who was involved. Bleou announced the opening of an investigation arrests or publicized findings. Rebel groups, now known collectively as the New Forces, released a statement denying that they had any intention to harm Agre.

In February an unknown gunman shot at five members of the executive committee of the Ivoirian High Council of Imams (COSIM) who were meeting on the terrace of the Riviera Mosque in Abidjan. Two days after the event, the Minister of Religion, Minister of Security, and President Gbagbo's religious advisor met the imams to express their concern. The imams alleged at a press conference that Government response was far slower than its reaction to the threat against Cardinal Agre. The Minister of Security opened an investigation into the attack; however, no results were released, and no arrests were made in connection with the attack by the end of the reporting period.

Following the 2002 rebellion, there were credible reports that Government military and security forces committed abuses, including reprisal killings, against presumed rebel sympathizers, which included many Muslims. In October 2002, government security forces reportedly killed more than 100 noncombatants, mostly Muslims, in Daloa who allegedly supported the advancing rebel forces. The Government denied that its forces were responsible for the 2002 Daloa killings. However, the international press and human rights organizations reported that security forces were responsible for the killings in Daloa, citing multiple eyewitnesses. In October 2002, the Government announced an investigation into the killings, which so far has yielded no arrests or other results.

During the early days of the 2002 crisis, government forces, along with unknown assailants, reportedly killed several Muslim leaders. There have been no arrests for the January and February 2003 killings of Mamadou Ganame, a Koranic instructor in Bianoua, Ayame (in the southeast); Imam Mahmoud Samassi, founder and Imam of the Lycee Technique Mosque in Abidjan at his residence; Mohamed Sangare, assistant Imam for the Adobo Mosque in Abidjan; and Mory Fanny Cisse, an Islamic preacher.

Unlike in the previous reporting period, there were no reports that government security forces forcibly searched mosques. According to the CNI, government security forces forcibly searched 7 mosques and reportedly looted residences of at least 10 Muslim leaders in Abidjan during the previous reporting period.

No action was taken in response to the April 2003 allegations by Daloa Muslim leaders that gendarmes regularly entered their mosques to conduct searches.

Unlike in the past, there were no reports that security forces detained and questioned Islamic leaders on suspicions that they were plotting with the rebel New Forces.

Unlike in the past, there were no reports that the Federation of Students and Scholars of Cote d'Ivoire student group had perpetrated violence against Muslim student groups.

Information gathering is more difficult in the rebel-held North and West. Unlike in the previous reporting period, there were no reports of rebel New Forces intimidating or attacking Christian or other religious leaders in New Forces-held territory. A Ministry of Religion official said that Catholic priests and bishops in the north regularly hold religious services without any interference from the New Forces. In April rebel Patriotic Movement of Cote d'Ivoire Secretary-General Guillaume Soro, a Catholic, paid courtesy calls on several Catholic and Muslim leaders in New Forces-held villages. Soro told the religious leaders that the New Forces, which are often erroneously characterized in the press as being a "Muslim" rebel group, do not tolerate discrimination against any religion.

At the outset of the rebellion in September 2002, rebels in Bouake and elsewhere in the North, executed more than 100 persons. Most of those executed were Christians and members of the armed forces or persons thought to be loyal to the Government. No action was taken against rebels who beat several Buddhist missionaries traveling to Bouake in April 2003; rebels who tortured three Christian priests in Korhogo in April 2003; or rebels who tortured Maurice Dodo, a church leader in Daloa in April 2003.

Unlike in the previous reporting period, there were no new reports of attacks on churches. There is an ongoing investigation into the killing of prominent Muslim comedian Camara Yerefe in an Abidjan church; however, no arrests have been made.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations among the various religious groups became strained after the outbreak of the 2002 national crisis; there is some societal discrimination against Muslims and followers of traditional indigenous religions.

Some persons consider all Muslims to be foreigners or fundamentalists, and sometimes refer to Muslims as "destabilizing forces." Some political parties and religious representatives have made similar statements so as to use religious divisions to further political interests. One of the more prominent examples is the May 29 speech by Imam Fofana Harrisou, chairman of a pro-FPI (Ivoirian Popular Front) Muslim group, before a group of progovernment "Young Patriots." In the speech, Harrisou claimed opposition party, Rally of Republicans (RDR) had offered approximately \$120,000 USD (64,323,403 XOF) to his organization if its Muslim members would "cause instability" in the country. Harrisou said he declined the offer. The Forum of Religious Confessions, which includes Muslim and Christian leaders, immediately condemned Harrisou's comments by announcing that Harrisou had no evidence to support his claims and that his comments endangered social and religious cohesion in the country. The CNI, which is the largest Muslim group in the country, and the RDR denied Harrisou's accusations.

Muslims frequently experienced discrimination because of their presumed support for the presidential candidacy of former Prime Minister Alassane Ouattara, a Muslim, or because of their ethnic origin. Although many northern Muslims supported the presidential candidacy of

Ouattara and the RDR opposition party, some Muslims of northern origin have remained loyal to President Gbagbo's FPI party throughout the crisis.

Followers of traditional indigenous religions also are subject to societal discrimination. Some Christians and Muslims refuse to associate with practitioners of traditional indigenous religions. Many leaders of religions such as Christianity or Islam look down on practitioners of traditional indigenous religions as "pagans" or practitioners of "black magic" and human sacrifice. Although the purported practice of "black magic" or "witchcraft" is widely feared, traditional indigenous religions discourage such practices. For example, there have been no reports of human sacrifice in the country since well before independence.

The practices of traditional indigenous religions often are secret and include exclusive initiation rites, oaths of silence, and taboos against writing down orally transmitted history. Traditional indigenous religions commonly involve belief in one supreme deity as well as lesser deities or spirits that are to be praised or appeased. Some indigenous religions believe that deities and spirits inhabit or associate with particular places, natural objects, or man-made images. Many practitioners of traditional indigenous religions are unaware of or do not consider themselves victims of societal discrimination and do not complain about their treatment.

Conflicts between and within religious groups have surfaced occasionally. For more than 15 years, the Celestial Christians have been divided because of a leadership struggle. In June 2003, a clash between rival leaders Blin Jacob Edimou and Louis Akeble Zagadou over the ownership of a church led to the arrest of six men; they were later released. In September 2003, the Minister of Religion sent a delegation to Nigeria and Benin to consult with Celestial Christian leaders. In an attempt to end the church's religious dispute, and with the support of the Ministry of Religion, World Celestial Christian leader, Pastor Benoit Agbaossi, came to Abidjan in April and inaugurated Blin Jacob Edimou as the Celestial Christian leader for the country.

The Ministry of Religion took an active role in trying to end the leadership struggle that divided the Harrist community for more than 10 years. In November 2003, the Minister of Religion, along with Christian and Muslim leaders, attended the inauguration of Adolphe Mobio as the new President of the Harrist Church.

Relations between Muslims and Christians, specifically Catholics, improved during the period covered by this report. In January, to celebrate the New Year, leaders of all major religious groups and the Minister of Religion met within the Forum of Religious Groups, an NGO-inspired, interdenominational gathering. In April an interfaith memorial service was held in Abidjan to mourn those killed during the March 25 to 27 demonstrations. Religious leaders continued to attend each other's main religious celebrations, setting an example of reconciliation for their respective communities.

Prior to the crisis, there were examples of long-standing interfaith cooperation. The cooperation has resumed to a lesser extent during the period covered by this report. Once a year, on New Year's Eve, members of all Christian religious groups gather in the National Stadium in Abidjan for a nightlong vigil and prayer. When serious social problems arose, simultaneous Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim prayer ceremonies were held in churches, temples, and mosques to ask for divine assistance. Kouassi-Datekro, a town in the Akan region in the eastern part of the country, is famous for ecumenical events involving simultaneous prayer services of all faiths. Religious leaders from diverse groups assembled on their own initiative to mediate in times of political conflict; however, no leaders of traditional indigenous religious groups were included.

The Forum of Religious Confessions endeavors to promote dialogue, increase understanding, and improve the relationships among religious leaders and groups and is headed by the leader of the Celestial Christian Church. The Research Group in Democracy and Social and Economic Development of Cote d'Ivoire (GERDDES-CI) created the Forum, which comprises leaders of many of the country's religious groups, including Catholics, Muslims, various Protestant groups, several syncretist groups, the Association of Traditional Priests, and the Bossonists, an association of indigenous Akan religious priests. The Ministry of Religion cooperates closely and regularly with the Forum of Religious Confessions.

GERDDES-CI also helped create the Collective of Civil Society for Peace (CCSP), which worked since the beginning of the 2002 crisis to promote national reconciliation. Some observers believe that the CCSP's work helped prevent the national crisis from turning into a civil war.

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. Since the onset of the crisis, the U.S. Embassy has assisted efforts by the Government and nongovernmental organizations to mitigate religious tensions in the country. The U.S. Ambassador and other U.S. Government officials regularly meet with religious leaders. The Public Diplomacy section hosted a forum to which all religious denominations were invited to discuss the political crisis from the perspective of religious organizations. The U.S. Government sent several religious leaders to the United States on International Visitor programs.

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