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Congo, Democratic Republic of the

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The transitional Constitution and the proposed new constitution provide for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom in areas under central government control during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. In areas under marginal government control, respect for religious freedom improved.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there continued to be credible reports that a number of children and elderly persons were accused of witchcraft and abandoned or abused by their families.

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 its population is approximately 60 million. Approximately 50 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 20 percent is Protestant, 10 percent is Kimbanguist, and 10 percent is Muslim. The remainder largely practice traditional indigenous religions. There are no statistics available on the percentage of atheists. Minority religious groups include, among others, Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

There is no reliable data on active participation in religious services. Ethnic and political differences generally are not linked to religious differences.

Foreign missionaries operate freely within the country. Missionary groups include Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, Evangelicals, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Most religious groups are scattered throughout the country and are widely represented in most cities and large towns. Muslims are mostly concentrated in the province of Maniema. Members of traditional Bunka dia Kongo reside predominately in Bas Congo.

Section II. Status of Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

Article 26 of the transitional Constitution provides for religious freedom, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. During the period covered by this report, the transitional Parliament approved a new constitution that provides for the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; the constitution was scheduled to be presented to the people for ratification before the end of 2005. There is no state religion.

The establishment and operation of religious institutions is provided for and regulated through a statutory order on the Regulation of Nonprofit Associations and Public Utility 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, this law was not invoked 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 to 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 operate 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 foreign missionaries generally are allowed to proselytize. The Government generally did not interfere with foreign missionaries.

The Government promoted interfaith understanding by supporting and consulting with the country's five major religious groups (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Muslim, and Kimbanguist). The Consortium of Traditional Religious Leaders serves 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. While the Government generally did not interfere with foreign missionaries, these groups were not exempt from general restrictions or violent crimes committed by security forces. For example, on May 7, 2005, men in military uniform shot and killed a 71-year-old Belgian Jesuit priest while robbing a grocery store. In early June, police arrested and charged five Congolese Armed Forces deserters with the crime. At the end of the period covered by this report, they were still awaiting trial. The victim was in a high crime area, and there was no evidence the man was targeted because he was a priest.

Bundu Dia Kongo, an ethnically based spiritual and political movement that called for the establishment of an "ethnically pure" kingdom from the Bakongo tribe, remained outlawed.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

In areas under marginal government control, respect for religious freedom improved. Although a Catholic parish was looted in rural South Kivu in November 2004, there was no evidence that the robbery was motivated by religious factors. No individuals responsible for cases from previous periods have been charged, tried, or convicted of wrongdoing.

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 individuals or organizations designated as terrorist organizations.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, many children and elderly persons were accused of practicing witchcraft and driven from their homes by their families.

During the period covered by this report, there continued to be reports of incidents in which persons suspected of witchcraft were attacked, tortured, killed, or driven from their homes. There is a common belief in the region that some persons have the power to cast spells on others; this fear sometimes rises to mass hysteria. During the period covered by this report, there was an increase in reports that certain leaders of "revelation" churches, or small evangelical Protestant churches, exploited the people's 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. No one was charged, prosecuted, or punished for such crimes reported in previous years.

Leaders of major religions consult 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 meet with religious leaders throughout the country. In addition, the Embassy awards self-help, human rights, and democracy funds to religious groups for a wide range of activities. For example, the Embassy provided funding for Catholic nuns to increase livestock production at an orphanage, the Salvation Army to purchase a corn sheller, and a Baptist group to teach democracy, civics, and elections in schools. Also, the Embassy conducted extensive outreach with members of the Muslim community and awarded 22 scholarships for the second year in a row to Muslim citizens to assist them in learning English.

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