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2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Central African Republic

Executive Summary

The interim constitution, known as the Transitional National Charter, provides for freedom of religion and equal protection under the law regardless of religion. It prohibits all forms of intolerance and “religious fundamentalism.” Transitional government officials exercised limited control or influence in most of the country and failed to stop or punish abuses by predominantly Muslim ex-Seleka or predominantly Christian anti-Balaka militias.

The continuing violence by the ex-Seleka and anti-Balaka forces further exacerbated interreligious tension and hatred. Both sides were responsible for violent attacks on civilians because of their religious affiliation and the destruction and pillaging of religious edifices, resulting in some 3,000 deaths and the displacement of more than one million people. Muslims faced social discrimination and were targets of hate speech in some of the print media. Thousands of Muslims faced food and

personal insecurity in urban enclaves, while thousands of Christians and Muslims lived precariously in camps for internally displaced persons.

On September 14, the U.S. government resumed embassy operations after a nearly two-year hiatus. The return of U.S. diplomats facilitated discussions about religious freedom concerns with the government and meetings with the leaders of religious groups. In his address to the UN General Assembly, President Obama cited the conflict's religious dimension and call by Christian and Muslim leaders in the country to reject violence. Secretary of State Kerry condemned interreligious violence in the country and called for reconciliation. The U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and a group of prominent U.S. Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim leaders visited the country and met with religious leaders, civil society groups, and rebel movements to promote religious tolerance and reconciliation. The religious leaders and members of the various groups signed a declaration rejecting violence and calling for intercommunity and interreligious dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.3 million (July 2014 estimate). According to the 2003 census, the population is 51 percent Protestant, 29 percent Roman Catholic, 10 percent Muslim, and 4.5 percent other religious groups, while 5.5 percent have no religious beliefs. The nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) Oxfam and Coef5 have put the percentage of Muslims at up to 15 percent. Some Christians and Muslims incorporate aspects of indigenous beliefs into their religious practices.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Transitional National Charter was adopted in July 2013 and provides for freedom of religion and equal protection under the law regardless of religion. It prohibits all forms of intolerance and "religious fundamentalism." It specifies an oath of office for the head of state made "before God" that includes a promise to fulfill the duties of the office without any consideration of religion or faith. It specifies that the country's legislative body, the 135-member National Council, include six members from religious groups and prohibits political parties identified with a particular religious group.

Religious groups, except for indigenous religious groups, are required to register with the Ministry of Territorial Administration. To register, religious groups have to prove they have a minimum of 1,000 members and leaders whose religious education the government deems adequate.

The law permits the ministry to deny registration to any religious group it deems offensive to public morals or likely to disturb social peace, and to suspend the operation of registered religious groups if it finds their activities subversive. Registration is free and confers official recognition and certain

limited benefits, such as customs duty exemptions for vehicles or equipment. There are no penalties prescribed for groups that fail to register.

The law does not prohibit religious instruction in public or private schools, but it is not part of the public school curriculum.

Government Practices

Transitional government officials exercised limited control or influence in most of the country during the year, and police and gendarmerie failed to stop or punish abuses by either the predominantly Muslim ex-Seleka or predominantly Christian anti-Balaka militias.

Michel Djotodia, the former rebel leader who became president in 2013 after Seleka forces overthrew the previous government, resigned in January and Catherine Samba-Panza assumed the transitional presidency. Samba-Panza appointed Mahamat Kamoun as the country's first Muslim prime minister on August 10. On October 4, the president celebrated Eid al-Adha at the Central Mosque in Bangui.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The upsurge in interreligious violence in numerous incidents from December 2013 through the end of the year reportedly resulted in more than 3,000 deaths and the displacement of more than one million people throughout the country, exacerbating an already dire humanitarian situation.

The escalating violence carried out by ex-Seleka and anti-Balaka forces against, respectively, Christians and Muslims fomented interreligious tension and hatred that civil society groups reported had not existed prior to start of the violence in 2013, and that threatened to spiral out of control in many parts of the country.

Many Muslim families fled their homes and some 50,000 Muslim and Christian third-country nationals left the country.

Muslim fighters attacked Christians sheltering on church properties. On May 28, men armed with automatic weapons and hand grenades killed 17 people, including a priest, at Our Lady of Fatima Cathedral in Bangui. On July 7, ex-Seleka fighters armed with rifles and grenades invaded the St. Joseph Cathedral compound in Bambari, killing 26, including 11 women and children, and wounding 35. Approximately 12,000 internally displaced persons had sought refuge in the compound because of escalating violence in the Bambari area. In a statement broadcast on Radio Ndeke Luka, the bishop blamed the ex-Seleka for looting the church.

In late January a convoy carrying mostly Muslims, including ex-Seleka militia members, fired on the largely Christian residents of the town of Bocaranga, forcing many to flee.

In February clashes in the town of Boda left more than 75 dead, most of whom were Muslims.

Ex-Seleka and anti-Balaka groups were responsible for destroying religious sites. After the ex-Seleka looted several Catholic and Protestant churches during their advance to Bangui, anti-Balaka forces destroyed all mosques in areas they controlled, including several in Bangui. Christian groups destroyed all but six of Bangui's 37 mosques, according to the Muslim community in the capital.

Muslims reported facing consistent social discrimination. Vigilantes frequently vandalized Muslim-owned shops and sometimes subjected Muslims to harassment, beatings, and detention. Thousands of Muslims lived in urban enclaves that faced food and personal insecurity.

Hate speech directed at Muslims was evident in some of the media. According to a study conducted in April and May by the Central African Media Monitoring organization (OMCA), there were 79 examples of hate speech related to faith. Nineteen percent of newspaper articles discussing ways to resolve the conflict proposed a radical solution, such as "Muslims should leave the Central African Republic." In addition, OMCA noted reporting on interfaith peace initiatives often lacked a Muslim perspective. Journalists tended to interview Christian victims of violence, often adopting the victims' habit of using phrases such as "Muslim bandits," "ex-Seleka militia fighters," and the "Muslim community" interchangeably.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

On September 14, the U.S. government resumed embassy operations after a nearly two-year hiatus resulting from security concerns. The return of U.S. diplomats facilitated discussions about religious freedom concerns with the government and leaders of religious groups.

In his address to the UN General Assembly September 24, President Obama cited "Christian and Muslim leaders who came together in the Central African Republic to reject violence – listen to the imam who said, 'Politics try to divide the religious in our country, but religion shouldn't be a cause of hate, war, or strife.'" On January 27, Secretary of State Kerry issued a statement noting, "The United States is deeply concerned by renewed interreligious violence in the Central African Republic (CAR). We condemn attacks by both anti-Balaka and Seleka groups in Bangui and the provinces. We are also deeply disturbed by reports that some CAR leaders may be supporting attacks by anti-Balaka and Seleka, respectively, instead of working toward peace and reconciliation." On February 5, the Department of State spokesperson issued a statement noting the deep U.S. concern over the sectarian attacks against Muslims and Christians and the deaths and population displacements they caused, and calling for an end to the violence and a move toward a stable and peaceful society.

On January 7, the U.S. Special Envoy to the OIC hosted an interreligious dialogue on the crisis from Washington, D.C., connecting religious leaders in the two countries to highlight their efforts to promote peace and reconciliation. Dieudonne Nzapalainga, Archbishop of Bangui; Imam Omar Kobine Layama, President of the National Islamic Association; Reverend Nicolas Geurekoyame Gbangou, President of the Evangelical Association; and Catherine Samba-Panza, then Mayor of Bangui, participated in the online video conference from Bangui.

On April 7, a delegation including the Special Envoy to the OIC, the Department of State's Senior Adviser for the Central African Republic, and senior representatives from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, and the president of the

Islamic Society of North America met at a Bangui mosque with imams and community leaders, and at a cathedral with an audience of Christian leaders. They also met with Transitional President Samba-Panza, members of civil society groups, youth leaders, women leaders, representatives of anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka movements, and representatives of NGOs. The religious leaders and members of the various groups signed a declaration rejecting violence and calling for intercommunity and interreligious dialogue.

On September 22, U.S. embassy officials visited the Central Mosque in Bangui and met with four imams, three of whom had had their mosques destroyed by anti-Balaka elements. The imams described how Muslim men and women walking in non-Muslim parts of the city disguised themselves to avoid being attacked or harassed, and how Muslims faced discrimination when applying for passports. The Chargé d’Affaires stressed the importance of tolerance of and respect for different faiths and the right of Muslims to participate fully in the social, economic, and political life of the country.

The U.S. government requested local radio stations and other media in the country to transmit messages from local Christian and Muslim religious leaders urging peace and reconciliation.

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