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2009 Report on International Religious Freedom - Cote d'Ivoire

[Covers the period from July 1, 2008, to June 30, 2009]

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

Some interreligious tension among Catholics, Muslims, followers of indigenous beliefs, and evangelical Protestants continued with each group feeling disadvantaged vis-à-vis the others. However, religious leaders made concerted efforts to encourage interfaith dialogue.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy officials regularly met with a broad range of civil society groups that promote religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 124,500 square miles and a population of 18 million. An estimated 35 to 40 percent of the population is Christian and an equal percentage is Muslim; an estimated 25 percent practices indigenous religious beliefs. Many persons who are nominally Christian or Muslim also practice some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs.

Traditionally, the north is associated with Islam and the south with Christianity, although practitioners of both religions live throughout the country. The political crisis that began in 2002 displaced over 700,000 persons internally, many to a different region. In general, political and religious affiliations tend to follow ethnic and socioeconomic lines.

Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Assemblies of God, Southern Baptists, Coptics, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

Other religious groups include Buddhists, Baha'is, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and Bossonists, who follow a traditional practice of the Akan ethnic group.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Although there is no state religion, the country's first two presidents were Catholic. For this reason, the Government has historically favored Christianity, particularly Catholicism.

The Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Maulid al-Nabi, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Pentecost Monday, Lailat al-Qadr, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, All Saints' Day, and Christmas.

Muslims are underrepresented in official positions, including in the civil service. Muslims are also underrepresented in state-supported media outlets, particularly radio and television stations.

The law requires all religious groups to register with the Government. Groups must submit an application to the Ministry of Interior's Department of Faith-Based Organizations. This application must include the group's bylaws, names of the founding members and board members, date of founding (or the date on which the founder received the revelation of his or her calling), and general assembly minutes. The Ministry of Interior investigates the organization to ensure that the group has no politically subversive members or purpose.

The Department of Faith-Based Organizations is responsible for promoting religious freedom and official secularism in the country. It funds construction at religious sites and travel for religious pilgrimages.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

Although religious leaders criticized the Government without recourse or retaliation, some religious groups complained that the Government did not allow all religious groups equal access to national media outlets, including state-run television and radio.

Many northern Muslims continued to feel discriminated against when applying for certificates of nationality and passports, despite the Government's continued efforts to issue replacement birth certificates and to ensure that citizens lacking identification documents could register to vote.

Some Muslim organizations viewed the Government's organizational requirements for Hajj trips to Saudi Arabia as unnecessary and unwarranted interference in religious affairs. Although less publicized, the Government also funded some pilgrimage trips by Catholics. The Government's role in determining which groups received subsidies for their religious trips remained a highly charged political decision.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees 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 who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some societal discrimination against Muslims and followers of indigenous religious beliefs

continued during the reporting period. Other groups, particularly evangelical Christians, complained that some government officials discriminated and perpetrated sectarian hostility at the local level. The ongoing political crisis caused some divisions along ethnic and religious lines.

Religious leaders continued to organize public interfaith activities during the reporting period, issuing joint statements to promote national reconciliation, elections, and tolerance.

The Forum of Religious Confessions promoted dialogue and improved relationships among religious leaders and groups. The Collective of Religious Confessions for National Reconciliation and Peace promoted similar goals and included evangelical churches that had previously refused to join the Forum.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy officials regularly met with a broad range of civil society groups that promote religious tolerance.

From June 11-17, 2009, the Embassy hosted an American imam who spoke to groups in Abidjan, Bouake, and Yamoussoukro about religious tolerance in the United States.

On March 12, 2009, the Embassy coordinated a web chat between Muslim businesswomen and student leaders and Muslim women in America that highlighted religious freedom and tolerance in the United States.

On January 29, 2009, the Embassy hosted a well-attended book program on world religions and democracy. Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim religious leaders discussed how fundamental democratic values are reflected in different religions.

On January 21, 2009, the Embassy hosted a program focused on religious tolerance and Muslim communities in the United States. The program included more than 600 participants, including Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim religious leaders, and was featured on national television.

During the reporting period, the Embassy also distributed more than 600 copies of a State Department publication "Muslims in America" and 300 copies of another entitled "Freedom of Faith."
