

Rwanda (100)



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

2002/71511-65  
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## Rwanda

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## International Religious Freedom Report 2002

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

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, while the Government generally respects this right in practice, it imposes some restrictions.

There was a deterioration in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Since January 2002, there have been new reports that local officials detained members of Jehovah's Witnesses and that school authorities harassed student members. Most of those detained were released; however, two members of the group remained in detention at the end of the period covered by this report. Authorities also arrested members of a religiously oriented nongovernmental organization (NGO) and forbade a former president of the country from attending public church services. The Government continued to watch closely for the development of cult churches and, in March 2002, arrested the leaders of a group considered to be a dangerous cult. However, unlike in the period covered by the previous report, the Government did not tear down any "storefront" churches. Relations between the Government and the Catholic Church continued to improve.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 10,169 square miles, and its population is approximately 8.1 million. A 2001 study conducted by researchers from Johns Hopkins University reported that 49.6 percent of the population were Catholic, 43.9 percent Protestant, 4.6 percent Muslim, 1.7 claimed no religious beliefs, and 0.1 percent practiced traditional indigenous beliefs. This study indicated a 19.9 percent increase in the number of Protestants, a 7.6 percent drop in the number of Catholics, and a 3.5 percent increase in the number of Muslims from the U.N. Population Fund survey in 1996. The figures for Protestants include the growing number of members of Jehovah's Witnesses and evangelical Protestant groups. There also is a small population of Baha'is. There has been a proliferation of small, usually Christian-linked sects since the 1994 genocide.

Foreign missionaries and church-linked NGO's of various faiths operate in the country, including Trocaire, Catholic Relief Services, Lutheran World Federation, World Vision, World Relief, Adventist Development and Relief Agency, Norwegian Church Aid, Salvation Army, African Muslim Agency, American Jewish Distribution Committee, Jesuit Relief Society, Christian Aid, Christian Direct Outreach, Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, and Jesus Alive Ministries. Foreign missionaries openly promote their religious beliefs, and the Government has welcomed their development assistance.

There is no indication that religious belief is linked directly to membership in any political party. Of the eight parties, the only one with a religious component to its name--the Democratic Islamic Party--claims to have non-Muslim members.

## Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

## Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, while the Government generally respects this right in practice, it imposes some restrictions. There is no state religion.

The law provides for small fines and imprisonment for up to 6 months for anyone who interferes with a religious ceremony or with a minister in the exercise of his profession.

In April 2001, the Government promulgated a law that increases government influence over NGO's and requires all nonprofit organizations, including churches and religious organizations, to register with the Ministry of Justice to acquire the status of "legal entity." All religious groups reportedly met the April 1, 2002, deadline for filing registration applications, and many groups were granted status as legal entities by the end of the period covered by this report. Other groups experienced delays because of government security procedures, such as criminal background checks of group leaders, or because they

were unable to provide required documentation, such as asset statements, financial reports, and constitutions. Ministry of Justice officials worked to resolve these issues with representatives of the religious groups. During the period covered by this report, no application was denied, and no group's religious activities were curtailed as a result of difficulties or delays in the registration process.

The Government permits religious instruction in public schools. In some cases, students are given a choice between instruction in "religion" or "morals." In the past, missionaries established schools that were operated by the Government. In those schools, religious instruction tends to reflect the denomination of the founders, either Catholic or Protestant. Christian and Muslim private schools operate as well.

The Government observes four religious holidays as official holidays: Christmas, Eid-al-Fitr, All Saints' Day, and Assumption.

The Government, within its limited financial means, has sponsored or participated in a number of religious fora aimed at increasing interfaith understanding and support. In 2001 more than 100 religious organizations also participated in a national conference of independent sections; prior to 1994, the Government allowed only six religious organizations to operate in the country. Relations between the Government and the Catholic Church continued to improve because of collaboration and dialog in the areas of education and reconciliation.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

In the past, the Government forbade religious meetings at night on the grounds that insurgents formerly used the guise of nighttime "religious meetings" to assemble their supporters before attacking nearby targets; however, during the period covered by this report, the Government allowed such meetings if churches provided advance notification. Religious leaders reportedly cooperated with the Government in limiting nighttime religious meetings and did not view the restriction as an infringement on their religious freedom. The Government continued to require religious groups to hold services at their established places of worship and to ban the use of private homes for this purpose. Some small religious groups that met in private homes were forced to move to new locations.

Unlike in the period covered by the previous report, no "storefront" churches were torn down because the churches were not registered with the Ministry of Justice. In 2001 the Government's strategy changed to one of urging the groups to register with the Ministry of Justice in order to regularize their status. Some applications still were pending at the end of the period covered by this report.

During an April 2002 radio broadcast, the Prefect of Kibungo Province announced restrictions on the Jehovah's Witnesses' right of assembly and worship and also a ban on the construction of "Kingdom Halls," the group's places of worship. The restrictions were lifted after the group petitioned the national Government. In July 2000, the Prefect of Kibungo announced similar restrictions on the Jehovah's Witnesses' right of assembly and worship.

In February 2002, government authorities forbade Pasteur Bizimungu, a former president of the country who organized a political party that was banned by the Government in 2001, from attending public church services; authorities charged that Bizimungu's presence would be "divisive." The Government's action reportedly was politically motivated. The Government continued to watch closely for the development of cult churches after the doomsday cult deaths in Uganda in 2000.

#### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

During April and May 2002, local officials detained members of Jehovah's Witnesses, primarily for refusing to participate in nightly security patrols; arrests occurred in Kibungo, Byumba, and Gisenyi Provinces. On two separate occasions in Kibungo Province, government soldiers reportedly arrested persons, took them to military camps, and beat them. Other members of Jehovah's Witnesses, including one secondary school student, were arrested for refusing to salute the flag or to sing the national anthem. Delegations of Jehovah's Witnesses who intervened with local or national authorities generally were able to secure the release of those arrested, who typically were detained from 2 days to 2 weeks; however, two persons remained in detention at the end of the period covered by this report. Local school authorities also suspended students for the same reasons. In Kibungo Province, the Prefect supported such suspensions; the students subsequently were expelled.

In January 2002, police in Butare arrested three members of a local NGO for publishing a newsletter calling for national reconciliation; authorities charged that the newsletter was an incitement to hatred. One of the persons arrested was released within hours of the arrest; the other two were detained for 1 month, after which they were released when a court determined that the charges were unsubstantiated. At the end of the period covered by this report, all three persons remained under government surveillance, and the NGO was not allowed to operate.

In March 2002, the Government arrested Laurent Kalibushi, a dissident Catholic priest, and several members of his prayer group who were holding meetings late into the night in a private home in Kigali. Authorities charged that the prayer group, the Mouvement Sacerdotal Marial, was an "unhealthy and anti-social cult" with ties to the 2000 doomsday cult in Uganda; a large cache of food and fuel found on the premises supported reports that the adults had stopped working and the children had stopped going to school. Some observers believed that the arrests were a result of the group's ties to the banned

political party of former president Bizimungu. Approximately 12 members of the group remained in detention at the end of the period covered by this report.

Some religious leaders were perpetrators of violence and discrimination, and several members of the clergy of various faiths have faced charges of genocide in Rwandan courts, in the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in Arusha, Tanzania, and in foreign courts, notably in Belgium. In September 2001, the ICTR trial for involvement in genocide of Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, a Seventh-Day Adventist pastor, and his son, Gerald Ntakirutimana, began. Catholic Bishop Misago, who was cleared of genocide related charges in June 2000, remained on the list of accused genocidaires after the prosecution announced its intention to appeal the verdict.

Numerous groups, particularly human rights groups, reported that Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA) troops and Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) rebels in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) targeted Catholic clergy for abuse. Abuses reportedly took the form of arbitrary killings, arrests, and disappearances of pastors, priests, and laymen; public threats against the lives of religious leaders; pillaging and destruction of church property; and the use of armed soldiers to disperse forcibly religious services. Credible reports indicate that RCD and RPA troops deliberately targeted churches and religious leaders in the towns and villages under their control. These actions were believed to be part of an attempt to intimidate the population and in retaliation for the growing role that churches provide as the only safe zones for community discussion and peaceful activism against the presence of Rwandan and RCD/Goma forces in the country.

There were no reports of religious prisoners; however, some Jehovah's Witnesses were detained for refusing to participate in nightly security patrols, saluting the national flag, and singing the national anthem.

#### *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 Attitudes**

Relations among the different religious groups generally are amicable. Disputes between religious groups are rare; however, during the period covered by this report, some local authorities increased tensions between groups when they harassed members of the Jehovah's Witnesses for not participating in nightly security patrols and publicly noted that Protestants, Muslims, and Catholics participated regularly (see Section II).

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. Embassy officials maintain regular contact with leaders and members of the religious communities in the country.

During the period covered by this report, U.S. Embassy officials approached senior government officials regarding the renewed official harassment and detention of Jehovah's Witnesses and the March 2002 arrests of members of the Mouvement Sacerdotal Marial. In February 2002, Embassy officials also intervened with senior government officials regarding the detention of the NGO members in Butare and the order to restrict former president Bizimungu from attending public church services.

Embassy officers held numerous meetings with members of the Catholic and Anglican Churches, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, leaders of the Muslim community, and small, evangelical Protestant groups, among others, to promote interfaith dialog and discuss religious freedom. In addition Embassy officers regularly met with local and international NGO's involved in peace, justice, and reconciliation efforts that focus on religious tolerance and freedoms.

Released on October 7, 2002

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