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Macedonia, Former Yugoslav Republic of

International Religious Freedom Report
 Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no overall change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report; however, beginning in early spring of 2001, an armed conflict began between the Government and armed ethnic Albanian extremists. While religion has not been a focus of the conflict, both sides have occasionally targeted religious buildings due to the linkage between religion and ethnicity in the country. The law places some limits on religious practice by restricting the establishments of places of worship and restricting where contributions may be made.

In 2000 both government policy and the generally amicable relationship among the various religious communities contributed to the free practice of religion. However, the religious communities often reflect an ethnic identity as well, and during 2001 societal tensions increased.

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 9,781 square miles and its population is approximately 2 million. The country has three major religions. Nominally, about 66 percent of the population are Macedonian Orthodox, about 30 percent are Muslim, about 1 percent are Roman Catholic, and about 3 percent are of other faiths (largely various Protestant denominations). There is also a small Jewish community in Skopje. Numerous foreign missionaries are active and represent a very wide range of faiths. Many of these missionaries enter the country in connection with other work, often charitable or medical. Several Protestant missionary groups and Jehovah's Witnesses are active. Religious participation tends to focus on major holidays or life cycle events.

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 law places some limits on religious practices including the establishment of places of worship and the collection of contributions. Despite the specific mention of the Macedonian Orthodox Church in the Constitution, that Church does not have official status.

The constitutional provision for religious freedom is refined further in the 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups. This law designates the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic community, and the Roman Catholic Church as religious communities, and all other religions as religious groups. However, there is no legal differentiation between religious communities and groups. In early 1999, the Constitutional Court struck down several provisions of the 1997 law, and in practice the remaining provisions of the law are not enforced consistently. A committee has been formed to draft a new law.

The Government requires that religious groups be registered. The 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups contained a number of specific requirements for the registration of religious groups that were struck down by the Constitutional Court in early 1999. Consequently, there was considerable confusion over which procedures still applied, and several foreign religious bodies experienced delays in their efforts to register. During the period covered by this report, the process remained slow and cumbersome. In practice, religious groups need to register to obtain permits to build churches, and to request visas for foreigners and other permits from the Government. During 2000 several international Protestant churches were granted legal registration, and several others were at some stage in the process as of the end of the period covered by this report. One Islamic group withdrew its 1998 application for registration but continues to operate openly without taking further steps toward legal registration. The Government has not taken any enforcement actions against the group. The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups also

requires that foreign nationals carrying out religious work and religious rites be registered with the Government's Commission on Relations with the Religious Communities. The Government does not actively monitor new groups or advise the public on them.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups places some restrictions on the establishment of places of worship. It provides that religious rites and religious activities "shall take place at churches, mosques, and other temples, and in gardens that are parts of those facilities, at cemeteries, and at other facilities of the religious group." Provision is made for holding services in other places, provided that a permit is obtained at least 15 days in advance. No permit or permission is required to perform religious rites in a private home. The law also states that religious activities "shall not violate the public peace and order, and shall not disrespect the religious feelings and other freedoms and rights" of persons who are not members of that particular religion. The Government does not actively enforce most of these provisions of the law but acts upon complaints when they are received.

Several registered Protestant groups have been unable to obtain building permits for new church facilities due to normal bureaucratic complications that affect all new construction. Churches and mosques often are built without the appropriate building permits. The Government has not taken any actions against religious buildings that lack proper construction permits.

The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups also places some limitations on the collection of contributions by restricting them only to places where religious rites and activities are conducted.

Children below the age of 10 years may not receive religious instruction without the permission of their parents or guardians.

The 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups specifically allows for foreign citizens to carry out religious activities, but only at the request of a registered religious body. Because many evangelical Christian missionaries wish to conduct religious activities that are aimed at the creation of new groups of believers, rather than at operating through existing churches, some foreign missionaries have chosen to disregard this portion of the law. This approach has on occasion led to difficulties for those missionaries, as the authorities have questioned their actual reasons for entering the country, usually on tourist visas. During the period covered by this report, several missionaries with improper immigration status were able to obtain religious worker visas. Several applications still were pending in June 2001.

The issue of restitution of previously state-owned religious properties has not been resolved fully. Many churches and mosques had extensive grounds or other properties that were expropriated by the Communist regime. Virtually all churches and mosques have been returned to the ownership of the appropriate religious community, but that is not the case for many of the other properties. Often the claims are complicated by the fact that the seized properties have changed hands many times or have been developed. In view of the country's very limited financial resources, it is unlikely that religious communities can expect to regain much from the expropriated properties.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

During the anti-Albanian riots in June 2001 in Bitola, during which rioters vandalized the village mosque (see Section III), local police reportedly did not take any actions to stop the attacks. According to nongovernmental observers, some witnesses claimed that a few police officers allegedly participated in the riots. The riots broke out after several Bitola police officers were killed by ethnic Albanian extremists. [P1]

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 Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

In 2000 both government policy and the generally amicable relationship among the various religious communities contributed to the free practice of religion. However, the religious communities often reflect an ethnic identity as well, and during 2001 societal tensions increased.

During the period covered by this report, there has been an ongoing armed conflict between the Government and armed ethnic Albanian extremists. While religion has not been a focus of the conflict, both sides have occasionally targeted religious buildings due to the linkage between religion and ethnicity in the country.

The religious communities in the country often reflect an ethnic identity as well. Specifically, most Muslims are ethnic Albanians, while virtually all Macedonian Orthodox believers are ethnic Macedonians. Societal discrimination is more likely to be based upon ethnic bias than upon religious prejudice.

During the period covered by this report, there were two significant anti-Albanian riots in Bitola, in April and June, which displayed anti-Muslim attitudes. In June 2001, rioters vandalized the Bitola mosque, breaking windows, setting fire to the mosque interior, and breaking open several graves. Rioters also sprayed swastikas and anti-Albanian graffiti on the mosque.

In the fall of 2000, local skinheads desecrated the Jewish cemetery in Bitola. The city government, in a gesture of tolerance, agreed to pay to repair the damage.

The leaders of the long-established Orthodox, Muslim, and Roman Catholic communities have better connections within the Government than do the leaders of new churches, and there were some indications of an effort by the established religions to use that influence to shut out newcomers.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

During the period covered by this report, the U.S. Embassy initiated an extensive dialog with the Government's Commission on Relations with the Religious Communities, the office charged with the implementation of the Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups. This contact was sought after several American missionaries advised the Embassy that they were having difficulties in their efforts to register their organizations or workers.

The Embassy also intervened successfully to help seven U.S. missionaries to regularize their status in the country. The missionaries had encountered bureaucratic obstruction in their attempts to obtain religious worker visas.

The leaders of the various religious communities in the country, as well as the head of the Commission on Religious Communities and Religious Groups, met with the Ambassador on several occasions during the period covered by this report.

[End]

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