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Belarus

International Religious Freedom Report 2003

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in practice.

The status of respect for religious freedom worsened during the period covered by this report. On October 31, 2002, the Government implemented a new law on religion, ignoring widespread domestic and foreign opposition. The law strongly restricts religious freedom. On June 12, the Government and the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC), a branch of the Russian Orthodox Church, signed a Concordat that many consider to elevate the BOC's status, providing the Church with privileges not enjoyed by other faiths. Authorities continued to harass other denominations and religions. The Government has repeatedly rejected the registration applications of some of these, including many Protestant denominations, the Belarusian Orthodox Autocephalous Church (BAOC), and some Eastern religions. Without registration, many of these groups find it difficult, if not impossible, to rent or purchase property to conduct religious services. The authorities continued to enforce a 1995 Cabinet of Ministers decree that restricts the activities of religious workers in an attempt to protect Orthodoxy and curtail the growth of other religions. During the period covered by this report, the government-run media continued to attack Protestant and other non-Orthodox religious groups. Despite continued harassment, some minority faiths have been able to function if they maintain a low profile, while others have openly declared their refusal to seek reregistration under the new religion law.

There are, for the most part, amicable relations among registered, traditional religious communities; however, anti-Semitism persisted, and negative attitudes toward minority faiths continued to increase.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues, including specific cases, and the poor human rights situation in the country with the Government, and called upon the authorities to ensure that the right to worship be provided to all citizens.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 76,810 square miles, and its population is approximately 9,990,000.

The country historically has been an area of interaction, as well as competition and conflict, between Russian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Repression under the Russian and Soviet empires resulted in a shift from the Greek Rite Catholic Church to the Orthodox Church as the majority religion, and a culture that is largely secular in orientation. According to a 1998 opinion poll, less than half of the population believed in God and approximately 60 percent identified for cultural or historical reasons with the Russian Orthodox Church. The Government indicates that of all persons who profess a religious faith approximately 80 percent belong to the Belarusian Orthodox Church and approximately 15 to 20 percent are estimated to be either practicing Roman Catholics or identify themselves with the Roman Catholic Church (the second largest religious grouping). Between 50,000 and 90,000 persons identify themselves as Jews. There are a number of Protestants and adherents to the Greek Rite Catholic Church and the Belarus Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Other minority religious faiths include, but are not limited to,

the following: Hare Krishnas, Hindus, Baha'i, Seventh-day Adventist, Old Believer, Muslim (the Supreme Administration of Muslims, abolished in 1939, reestablished in early 1994), Jehovah's Witnesses, Apostolic Christian, Calvinist, and Lutheran. A small community of ethnic Tatars, with roots dating back to the 11th century, practices Islam.

The country was designated an Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1989, thereby creating the BOC. Under the leadership of Patriarchal Exarch Filaret, the number of Orthodox parishes throughout the country had grown to approximately 1,265 by the end of the period covered by this report. There were approximately 400 Roman Catholic parishes in the country. The Roman Catholic presence traditionally has been stronger in areas under Polish influence in the west and north; however, the ethnic Polish community, numbering at least 400,000 persons, does not account for the total number of Roman Catholics, as parishes are found throughout the country. Sensitive to the dangers of the Roman Catholic Church being viewed as a "foreign" church or as a political threat, the Head of the Church has tried to keep out of the country's internal political problems. Although the Cardinal has prohibited the display of Polish national symbols in churches and encouraged the use of Belarusian in church services, some priests continued to conduct services in Polish for congregations of Polish speakers.

It is estimated that approximately 120,000 citizens were considered to have Jewish "nationality" near the end of the Soviet period in 1989, compared to between 50,000 and 90,000 at the end of the period covered by this report. At least half of the present Jewish population is thought to live in or near Minsk. A majority of the country's Jews are not actively religious. Of those who are, most are believed to be either Reform or Conservative. There is also a small but active Lubavitch community. In 2002 a Jewish Community Center, with foreign assistance opened in Minsk.

Adherents of Protestant faiths, while still small, are growing in number. Since 1990 the number of Protestant congregations, registered and unregistered, has more than doubled and totals more than 1,000 according to government and independent sources. Protestant faiths, although historically relatively small in the country, have been active in the country for hundreds of years. The two largest Protestant groups are registered under separate Pentecostal and Baptist unions. A significant number of Protestant churches, including charismatic and Pentecostal groups, remain unregistered.

There are a number of congregations of the Greek Rite Catholic Church, which once had a membership of approximately three-quarters of the population but suffered from severe persecution under Russian and Soviet rule. Following the 1991 reestablishment of Belarusian independence, the attempt to revive the Church, which maintains Orthodox rituals but is in communion with the Vatican, has had only limited success.

On November 14, 2002, a new Muslim organization, the Spiritual Office of Muslims, was established following a split within the Belarusian Muslim Religious Association, the main organizational body of the 30,000 Muslims in the country. Although the Spiritual Office of Muslims claims that 90 percent of the Muslim community belongs to this new Muslim organization, this claim cannot be confirmed.

Section II. Status of Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in practice. Although the 1996 amended Constitution reaffirms the equality of religions and denominations before the law, it also contains restrictive language that stipulates that cooperation between the State and religious organizations "is regulated with regard for their influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural, and country traditions of the Belarusian people."

A 2001 Presidential Edict reconstituted the State Committee for Religious and Nationalities Affairs as the Committee of Religious and Nationalities Affairs of the Council of Ministers (CRNA). The CRNA regulates all religious matters in the country.

On October 31, 2002, President Lukashenko formally signed a new religion law into effect, despite protests from international and domestic human rights organizations, the European

Union, and domestic religious groups, including Orthodox religious groups not affiliated with the BOC. On June 27, 2002, members of the lower house of the National Assembly overwhelmingly voted to postpone discussion of the religion law until the Fall session; however, on June 28, 2002, after intense government pressure, the lower house assembled its deputies, and they overwhelmingly voted to approve the draft law. The vote was taken, despite the fact that several deputies were unable to make the meeting. Media and eyewitness reports indicated that debate on the law was highly emotional, with some deputies allegedly exchanging profanity and anti-Semitic insults. The law recognizes the historical importance of the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox Judaism, Sunni Islam and Evangelical Lutheranism, groups commonly referred to as traditional faiths in society, as well as the "determining role of the Orthodox Church in the historical formation and development of spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people."

The law contains a number of very restrictive elements that increase the Government's control of the activities of religious groups. It requires all religious groups to receive prior governmental approval to import and distribute literature and prevents foreigners from leading religious organizations, yet denies groups the right to establish religious schools to train their own clergy. Further, the law establishes complex registration requirements that many religious groups, both traditional and nontraditional, will have difficulty fulfilling. The new law required all registered groups to reregister within 2 years and effectively banned immediately all religious activity of unregistered religious groups. Some registered religious groups may not be able to meet many of the new requirements; however, officials have stated publicly that no group that was registered when the law was enacted would lose its registration status. While leaders of some minority religious groups are skeptical of this assurance, there were no reports of the Government denying reregistration to previously registered religious groups during the period covered by this report.

The BOC has hailed the law, which according to Metropolitan Filaret, "offers additional protection of citizens from pseudo-religious forces and opens new prospects of cooperation between the state and the church." Similarly, the CRNA claimed that the law's adoption is necessary to protect society from so-called "destructive and pseudo-religious groups" that the Government claims are active in the country. Despite this claim, the Government has been unable to provide evidence that such groups exist. Although the Government has repeatedly cited the approval of the law by traditional faiths, members of these groups have expressed concerns with the law.

The new law establishes a three-tiered structure of religious groups: Religious communities, religious associations, and Republican religious associations. Religious communities, or local individual religious organizations, must comprise 20 people over the age of 18 who must live in neighboring areas. To register, the community must submit a list of founders with their full names, place of residence, citizenship, and signatures; copies of their founding statutes; minutes of their founding meeting; and permission confirming the community's right to any property indicated in their founding statutes. For those communities practicing religions not previously known to the Government, information on their faith must also be submitted. According to the law, the Oblast Executive Committees (for those groups outside of Minsk) or the Minsk City Executive Committee handle all application requests. While the law denies communities the right to establish institutions to train religious clergy, it permits them to operate Sunday schools.

Religious associations are comprised of 10 communities, 1 of which must have been active in the country for at least 20 years and can only be formed by a Republican (national level) religious association. To register, associations must provide a list of members of the managing body with biographical information, proof of permission that the association can be located at its designated location, and minutes from the founding congress of the association. By law, associations have the exclusive right to establish religious educational institutions, invite foreigners to work with respective religious groups, and organize cloister and monastic communities.

Republican religious associations are formed only when there are active religious communities in the majority of the oblasts in the country. By law, all applications to establish associations and Republican associations must be submitted to the CRNA.

On June 12, the Prime Minister and Metropolitan Filaret signed a Concordat between the BOC

and the Government. The Concordat guarantees the BOC autonomy in its internal affairs and the ability to fulfill all religious rights, as well as the right to consider itself in a special relationship with the State. It recognizes the BOC's "influence on the formulation of spiritual, cultural and national traditions of the Belarusian people." The Concordat calls for the Government and the BOC to cooperate in implementing policy in various fields, including education, development and protection of cultural legacies, and security. Although it states that the agreement will not limit the religious freedoms of other faiths, the Concordat calls for the Government and the BOC to combat unnamed "pseudo-religious structures that present a danger to individuals and society."

The Government refers to those groups it does not consider to be traditional faiths as "nontraditional," and government officials and state media also widely use the term "sect" when referring to nontraditional religious groups, although it is not an official designation. Authorities deny legal registration at the national level to nontraditional faiths and to all of those considered to be sects. The Government generally considers Protestant groups to be nontraditional, but it sometimes also considers some of them to be sects. As of March, the CRNA reported that there are 26 registered religions and 2,825 religious communities, of which 1,265 are Belarusian Orthodox, 492 are Evangelical Christian, 432 Roman Catholic, and 268 Baptist. Some congregations are registered only on a local basis, which provides only limited rights. Only congregations registered nationally are allowed to invite foreign religious workers and open new churches. While all registered religious organizations enjoy tax-exempt status, government subsidies appear limited to the BOC. Government employees are not required to take any kind of religious oath or practice elements of a particular faith.

Under regulations issued in 2001, the Government requires an invitation for representatives of foreign religious organizations to visit the country. Representatives must obtain a visa and permission from the CRNA, even if their visit is for nonreligious purposes such as charitable activities. The inviting organization must make a written request to invite foreign clergy, including the dates and reason for the visit. The CRNA has 20 days in which to respond and there is no provision for appeal of the CRNA's decision. Legislation restricts "subversive activities" by foreign organizations in the country and prohibits the establishment of offices of foreign organizations whose activities incite "national, religious and racial enmity" or could "have negative effects on the physical and mental health of the people."

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government increased its harassment of religious groups based not only upon the religion law, but also on directives that provide additional rules and requirements for religious groups that are not outlined in the law.

During the reporting period, the CRNA continued to deny registration to several religious groups. Authorities continued to refuse registration to the Hindu group "Light of Kaylasa," which has sought registration since 1992. Other religious groups such as the Unification Church and the Church of Scientology have also been denied registration.

On January 30, the CRNA issued a document containing methodological recommendations on registering and reregistering religious groups. According to the CRNA, these recommendations, which the Ministry of Justice did not approve, are intended to streamline registration and reregistration for all religious groups. It claims that this document is an internal document with no legal force; however, local officials used these recommendations to deny registration to a Church of Scientology religious community in Minsk.

In December 2002, a Minsk city Church of Scientology religious community submitted their application for registration with the CRNA. The CRNA later informed the group that their application was suspended because additional information about their religion was required and provided a list of 264 additional issues that the Church needed to address.

On October 18, 2002, a Minsk district court upheld the August 2002 decision by the CRNA to deny registration to a Hare Krishna religious association on the grounds that the association's legal address was not valid. The decision was made despite the fact that the legal address had been issued by local authorities. The CRNA's decision was made 17 months after the group had initially submitted its application in 2001. The group appealed the decision in the City and Supreme Courts in November 2002 and May 2003, respectively. Both courts upheld the decision to deny registering the religious association.

Authorities continued to refuse to register the BAOC. In October 2002, a BAOC community in Berestovitsky district submitted an application for registration, which local authorities rejected. The Government claimed that in 2001 it offered the Church the possibility of registration in Berestovitsky district if it dropped the word "Orthodox" from the name, but the Church refused. Although neither the Government nor the BOC recognizes Father Ian Spasyuk as a priest, he serves as the priest in charge of BAOC parishes for a faction that has close ties to the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. The BAOC is unable to train a sufficient number of priests to meet the growing needs of its parishioners in its 70 parishes because of its inability to register a seminary.

With or without official registration, some faiths have great difficulty renting or purchasing property to establish places of worship, difficulty building churches (e.g., the Greek Catholics and Protestant groups) or openly training clergy.

Citizens theoretically are not prohibited from proselytizing and may speak freely about their religious beliefs; however, authorities often intervene to prevent, interfere with, or punish individuals who proselytize on behalf of an unregistered religion. The Government continued to enforce a 1995 Council of Ministers decree that regulates the activities of religious workers. A 1997 Council of Ministers directive permits the teaching of religion at youth camps for registered religious groups.

Foreign missionaries are not permitted to engage in religious activities outside of the institutions that invited them. The law requires 1-year, multiple-entry "spiritual activities" visas for foreign missionaries. According to the CRNA, in 2002 all visa requests from religious organizations were approved. CRNA statistics show that over 1,250 foreigners went to the country to work with domestic religious groups. Among them, 375 were Roman Catholic, 203 Pentecostals, 142 Orthodox, 123 Baptists, and 196 Jews. Despite these figures, religious groups continue to experience difficulties in obtaining visas, even those that have a long history in the country. As a result of its revival since 1991, the Roman Catholic Church has experienced a shortage of qualified native clergy. At times the Church has had difficulty getting permission from authorities to bring in a sufficient number of foreign religious workers, primarily from Poland, to make up for the shortage. Members of the Hare Krishna and Protestant communities reported that they have been unable to invite foreign clergy to participate in religious activity in their respective religious organizations.

Between 2001 and 2002, foreigners invited by the Roman Catholic Church who had previously been granted 1-year multiple entry visas, were at first issued 6-month visas and then received 3-month visas, without explanation. In December 2002, the Government ended the practice of issuing 3-month visas to foreign Roman Catholic religious workers and once again began to reissue 1-year validity visas at a higher price than was previously charged. In the past, foreign clergy or religious workers who did not register with the authorities or who tried to preach without government approval, or without an invitation and permission from a registered religious organization, have been expelled from the country; however, there were no reports of such expulsions during the period covered by this report. Approval for visits by foreign clergy or religious workers often involves a lengthy bureaucratic process. Internal affairs agencies may expel foreign clergymen from the country by not extending their registration or by denying them temporary stay permits. These authorities may make decisions on expulsion on their own or based on recommendations from Religious Affairs Councils, regional executive committees, or the Religious Affairs Department of the Executive Committee of the city of Minsk.

A second Roman Catholic seminary was opened in Pinsk in September 2001, after one opened in Grodno in 1989. The Government indicated that in light of these new seminaries foreign priests would no longer be allowed to work in the country, although it did not always enforce this order at the local level and allowed at least some foreign priests to work. The Roman Catholic Church reported that local authorities in Grodno Oblast took steps to limit the number of foreign Roman Catholic workers and in April revoked the residence permits of and deported three foreign Roman Catholic nuns. Bishops must receive permission from the CRNA before transferring a foreign priest to another parish.

Since April, Grodno city authorities have repeatedly denied the registration of a foreign rabbi because he does not speak Belarusian or Russian.

There were no reports of discrimination against religious adherents in the military services.

Those who object to serving in armed units work in either construction or engineering battalions.

According to the Government, the law permits residential property to be used for religious services once it has been converted from residential use. The Housing Code permits the use of such property for nonresidential purposes with the permission of local executive and administrative bodies. Since 2000 local authorities have enforced this statute, effectively requiring all religious organizations to reregister their properties. Government figures indicated in 2002 that 110 religious communities, including 34 Protestant denominations, had their property registered through this process; however, authorities continue to deny permission to many Protestant churches, as well as other nontraditional faiths, which become caught in circular requirements. They are denied permission to convert their properties for religious uses because these groups are not registered religious groups. However, an organization must have a legal address to register. Religious groups that cannot register often are forced to meet illegally or in the homes of individual members. A number of nontraditional Protestant faiths have not attempted to register because they do not believe that their applications would be approved.

On October 2, 2002, Grodno Oblast authorities issued a directive to movie theaters to sever all existing rental agreements with churches that were conducting religious services at their movie theaters. Following the directive, a Grodno movie theater cancelled an existing agreement to rent its theater to the Living Word Church.

On November 14, 2002, the Minsk Prosecutor's Office requested regional prosecutors to monitor the implementation of the religion law. The letter instructed local prosecutors to verify the validity of lease agreements where religious services are conducted, whether minors participated in such services, and whether local authorities had approved these meetings. One Pentecostal group reported that local authorities questioned local pastors and instructed them to provide information about their communities, including lists of minors, despite the fact that no such list is required under the religion law. The pastors refused to provide these lists.

In December 2002, the CRNA sent a letter to oblast authorities advising them of the need to assess public opinion before the new construction of religious buildings and the reconfiguration of existing buildings for religious purposes. According to the CRNA, authorities may cite negative public opinion as a reason to prevent religious groups from constructing or renovating religious property, even though this requirement is not established in the law.

During the period covered by this report, many traditional and nontraditional religious groups continued to experience problems obtaining property, due to government efforts to restrict the ability of these groups to establish houses of worship. During the reporting period, local authorities rescinded an earlier decision to allocate property to a Pentecostal community in the town of Druzhnii, claiming that the group should first ascertain the public opinion of the town. Oblast authorities overruled the decision and local authorities have since offered the community three plots of land from which to choose. Authorities continue to deny permission to the registered New Life Evangelical Church to build a church in Minsk.

On September 13, 2002, Ibragim Kanapatsky, deputy Mufti of the Muslim Religious Association of Belarus, accused Minsk city authorities of imposing a high tax on land allotted to the Association to build a mosque to deliberately hamper the construction of the city's only mosque. However, in April, the Minsk City Council decided to lower land tax for religious groups. This decision has been implemented to the satisfaction of the Muslim Religious Association.

In October 2002, local authorities in the Minsk Oblast town of Borovlyani refused to permit a registered Full Gospel community to renovate a privately built home into a church. The community had received all necessary permission from local authorities, and the religious affairs office of the Minsk Oblast promised the necessary notification that the group was registered. Despite the promise to issue the notification and the fact that only the Minsk Oblast authorities have the right to make such a decision, the religious affairs office rejected the application outright. The CRNA office cited a letter it received from several Orthodox townspeople that accused members of the Full Gospel community of illegally entering homes to proselytize, stealing Orthodox crosses from those wearing them, and belonging to an unregistered sect. The letter was reportedly prepared by the local BOC priest. Despite the group's appeal to the Procurator General to prove these charges, no investigation has occurred.

A government decree specifies measures to ensure public order and safety during public

gatherings. Meeting hall officials have cited this decree as a basis for canceling or refusing to extend agreements with religious groups for the use of their facilities. Nontraditional groups were unable to rent space in meeting halls to conduct prayer services. According to the Full Gospel Evangelical Christian Church, during the reporting period, Minsk authorities have rejected at least five applications from the Church to rent space at a local meeting hall. In one case, on September 30, 2002, the Minsk City Court overturned a July 2002 decision by a local court to grant permission to rent the hall to the Church. During the reporting period, Protestants filed numerous requests to the CRNA to allow them to rent property to worship, most recently in June. In its responses, the CRNA claimed that only local authorities decide whether or not to grant such permission.

Although the Catholic Church opened a new church in Minsk in the first half of 2002, it cited difficulties in receiving permission from local authorities to build additional churches in Minsk. There were anecdotal reports of local officials denying land to Roman Catholic communities to construct churches in Brest Oblast.

Although it is registered officially, the Greek Catholic Church has experienced problems with the Government because of historical tensions between it and the Orthodox Church and its emphasis on the use of the Belarusian language. Along with some Protestant denominations, some Greek Catholic congregations also experienced difficulties renting venues for conducting services.

There were no reports of religious groups being evicted from property during the period covered by this report; however, authorities regularly broke up unsanctioned religious gatherings in apartments.

State-run periodicals as well as literature affiliated with the BOC continued to publish articles attacking Protestants and other nontraditional faiths. An article in the September 2002 issue of *Svyataya Rus* (Holy Russia) accused Protestants, Pentecostals, Hare Krishnas and others of fostering negative attitudes towards traditional faiths, of being unpatriotic, and of illicit drug use.

In April and May, the Minsk Community of Krishna Conscience and the Union of Evangelical Faith Christians filed separate appeals to the Procurator General's office to remove the textbook "Man, Society and State" from the educational curriculum. The book, published in 2002 and distributed throughout the country, discusses the various characteristics of religious sects. Both groups, which in the past have been described as sects, contend that the book espouses intolerance towards nontraditional faiths. According to the book, such groups believe in blind devotion to religious leaders, unconditional acceptance of doctrine, and voluntarily severance of all ties to society. The Ministry of Education's response on May 30 defended the use of the word "sect" as a scientific term and refused to remove the books from circulation or punish the writers of the book. The letter failed to respond to a Hare Krishna request for an explanation addressing the textbook's accusations about them. However, the Ministry promised not only to instruct teachers to devote more time in their lessons to this issue, but also to consider the concerns expressed by Hare Krishna and Evangelical Christian groups, as well as to revise the controversial text when the book is reprinted. Fearing for their safety, members of an unregistered Baptist community in Brest Oblast removed their children from classes. In March, the Ministry of Education released another textbook for religious instruction called *Religious Conduct* that describes Hare Krishnas, Evangelical Christians, and Scientologists as "neocults" and "sects."

During the reporting period, the government-run newspaper *Narodnaya Gazeta* continued to publish articles hostile towards Pentecostals in connection with the 2000 death of Igor Orlovsky, a Union of Evangelical Faith Christian deacon in the town of Starie Dorogi. The articles, which appeared in four issues, continued to allege that the pastor was sacrificed by Evangelical Christians. According to a January 2002 *Narodnaya Gazeta* article, the Church denied the requests of the deacon's mother to provide medical assistance to her son, who was dying of liver cirrhosis. Following his death, the mother accused the Church of deliberately poisoning her son in order to sacrifice him. This story also had been covered during an April 2001 episode of a television program called "Human Rights: A Look at the World." The show's host, Yevgeny Novikov, interviewed the deacon's mother, who accused the Church of "sacrificing" her son. The deacon's mother filed a suit against the Union of Evangelical Faith Christians and the pastor of the Church in Starie Dorogi for moral damages; a Minsk court dismissed her case.

In May 2001, the Union of Evangelical Faith Christians filed a slander suit against Novikov, the Belarusian Television and Radio Company, Narodnaya Gazeta, and the deacon's mother. On April 1, the Minsk City Court upheld a prior district court ruling that Novikov had defamed Evangelical Christians and ordered Novikov to air an open apology. Novikov's apology was aired during the June 21 television program "Pa Sutnasti." Instead of offering an apology to Evangelical Christians, Novikov's presentation was filled with numerous anti-Protestant remarks, which included his apology to "the sectists." The program was aired on the state-owned Belarusian Television Channel. According to the CRNA, after receiving complaints from Pentecostal groups, it sent a request to Belarusian Television for a copy of the program to submit for examination. Belarusian Television refused to provide a copy of this program. In its response to the groups, the CRNA claimed that it was unable to render a decision on the content of the program and advised the groups to pursue their cases in court. The CRNA further claimed that on June 23, Novikov appeared on television and issued a second apology, for comments made during his June 21 program; however, Protestant groups have stated that no such apology was aired.

An issue of the state-run newspaper Respublika published on April 18 contained an article alleging that a student at a Mogilev school had fallen under the "dangerous" influence of a Scientologist instructor at school, and that he was returned from his "zombie" state after a year of psychiatric treatment. The article also claimed that Scientology was a destructive sect that was engaged in illegal activity in the country.

A series of state television documentaries that targeted Protestants, particularly Pentecostals, and Catholics as destructive groups that engage in fanatical rituals and pose a threat to society were broadcast in 2000 and 2001. In March and April 2001, a series shown on state television accused Protestant churches of engaging in human sacrifices, poisoning children, and other "destructive rituals." In the series, CRNA officials claimed that Protestant groups were undermining the authority of the regime, were agents of the West, and needed to be banned from the country. The CRNA and the courts rejected efforts by Catholic and Protestant groups to halt these broadcasts. According to one lower house deputy and Protestant groups, members of the BOC showed the program to lower house deputies, in an effort to persuade the lower house deputies to approve the religion law prior to its passage.

Restitution of religious property remained limited during the period covered by this report. There is no legal basis for restitution of property that was seized during the Soviet and Nazi occupations, and the law restricts the restitution of property that is being used for cultural or educational purposes. Many former synagogues in Minsk are used as theaters, museums, sports complexes, and even a German-owned beer hall; most of the Jewish community's requests to have these synagogues returned have been refused. The few returns of property to religious communities have been on an individual and inconsistent basis, and local government authorities in general are reluctant to cooperate. Over the past several years, the Jewish community has lobbied the authorities successfully to return several properties in Minsk and other cities. According to Jewish groups, the most recent instance of restitution occurred in June 2002, when local authorities returned a synagogue to the Jewish community in Bobruisk. In 2000 and 2001, authorities in Molodechno and Kalinkovichi returned property to the local Jewish communities. Although the Roman Catholic Church has been somewhat successful in obtaining former Church property, it reported that it had been unable to secure the return of 21 former Catholic churches by the end of the reporting period. The Greek Catholic Church has indicated that only one of the many houses of worship taken from it when the region was annexed to the Russian Empire had been returned. The Orthodox Church appears to have had the most success on the issue of property restitution; however, a number of restitution claims by the Orthodox Church remained unresolved at the end of the period covered by this report.

During the reporting period, government officials continued to take a number of actions that indicated a lack of sensitivity toward the Jewish community. In January renovative construction work commenced at a sports stadium in Grodno that had been originally built in the 1950s on the site of a former Jewish cemetery that existed since the 1600s. During the course of excavating the earth, workers at the site found human remains, which were removed from the site to be collected for future reburial. Photographs taken by the Jewish community showed human remains, not only mixed in earth filling dump trucks, but also mixed with earth from the site and used to resurface a road. Despite appeals from the local Jewish community and international Jewish groups to halt construction, and mistreatment of remains, work continued at the site. However, Grodno authorities engaged in discussions with representatives of the local Jewish community to find an amicable solution that would include the reburial of remains

according to Jewish tradition, with a memorial, but no formal agreement was reached between the local Jewish community and Grodno authorities by the end of the reporting period.

In September 2002, authorities in Mogilev decided to change the status of the city's Jewish cemetery, which authorities had officially designated as a Jewish cemetery in 2001, to a public cemetery. Following the decision, local authorities permitted the removal of human remains and headstones from existing gravesites to make room for non-Jewish burials. Remains found during the digging were left on the ground. In June the local Jewish community sent an appeal to President Lukashenko to halt such activity. Following the appeal and pressure on local authorities, the authorities banned all non-Jewish burials in the site of the Jewish cemetery. As of June 30, the community was seeking to annul the September 2002 decision and to restore the status of the cemetery as a Jewish cemetery.

On July 9, 2002, approximately 30 people from a local Jewish organization protested against the continued construction in downtown Minsk of an apartment complex on the sites where two synagogues were located. In November 2002, 75 of 109 deputies in the lower house of the National Assembly issued an appeal to President Lukashenko to prevent the destruction of Jewish cultural landmarks in Minsk. In December 2002, the State Control Committee rejected the appeal, responding on behalf of President Lukashenko.

On September 19, 2002, the Minsk City Court upheld a previous district court decision to reject the lawsuit of a local Jewish leader to rebuild one of the synagogues that was demolished in September 2001.

In January 2002, authorities in Brest arrested and later released a 17-year-old for desecrating a Holocaust memorial.

During the reporting period, the Government took some steps to address issues concerning the Jewish community. On July 24, 2002, President Lukashenko issued a statement that there were no grounds for anti-Semitism in the country. In May, after consultations with the CRNA and Prosecutor General, the Ministry of Information ordered the removal of the Russian newspaper "Russkii Vestnik" from kiosks and stores in Minsk. The decision came following the April 3 appeal by several Jewish leaders to remove the newspaper, which printed several anti-Semitic articles during the reporting period.

During the reporting period, government officials continued to publicly make anti-Semitic statements. During a November 25 interview with the newspaper Belorusskaya Gazeta, Chair of the International Affairs Committee of the lower house of parliament, Sergei Kastsyan, said he opposed attempts to "turn Belarus into a springboard for Zionism." He added, "If a mosque or a synagogue stands in the way of the city development plan, I believe it is acceptable to bulldoze it." His remarks were in response to an appeal on November 15 by lower house deputies to preserve Jewish landmarks.

In a November 23, 2002 article in Narodnaya Gazeta, Eduard Skobelyov, editor of the Presidential Administration newspaper, blamed the influence of the "tens of officially registered Jewish groups in Belarus" and international Jewish organizations for hindering the "fight for historical truth." Several Jewish groups have claimed that Skobelyov published several anti-Semitic articles while a member of the Belarusian Communist Party in the early 1990s.

Despite the decision to pull Russkii Vestnik from distribution, during the reporting period, anti-Semitic literature continued to be sold in government buildings and in stores and at events indirectly associated with the Belarusian Orthodox Church. Anti-Semitic literature was openly sold during the April Verbny Kirmash Orthodox book fair. Anti-Semitic and Russian ultra-nationalist newspapers were sold at Pravoslavnaia Kniga (Orthodox Bookstore), a store that sells Orthodox literature and religious paraphernalia.

The July/August 2002 issue of the state-run literary journal Neman published a short story by Alexander Prokhanov, editor in chief of the Russian ultra-nationalist newspaper Zavtra. The story "Mr. Hexagon" included numerous anti-Semitic references.

According to the CRNA, the Committee regularly responds to all public expressions of xenophobia by notifying the relevant government agencies responsible for pursuing legal action

against them; however, no such legal actions were observed during the reporting period.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

During the reporting period, the Government frequently took steps abusing the religious freedom of several religious groups. While local authorities in April issued passports to family members of BAOC priest Yan Spasyuk, who had been unable to obtain passports since November 2001, the Government took numerous actions against the BAOC priest and a BAOC community in the town of Pogranichny.

The Government continuously harassed, threatened and arrested members of the unregistered Hindu community Light of Kaylasa. On July 13, 2002, police arrested 18 members of this community as they were preparing to hold a meditation ceremony in a Minsk park. Several of those arrested were jailed for 2 days and heavily fined. On August 9, 2002, police broke up an outdoor wedding ceremony that was being conducted by the group. On August 17, 2002, police broke up a demonstration held by the group protesting against Government pressure on the Light of Kaylasa. Six members of the group were sentenced to 10 days imprisonment, including Tatiana Akadanava, the leader of the group, and her husband Sergei, who was the group's Priest. The Akadanavs reported that while in detention, police refused to intervene during an incident when a fellow inmate attacked and beat Tatiana and refused to render medical assistance. Members who were not jailed received heavy fines.

On March 17, members of a Pentecostal group filed a complaint against Nikolai Sinitsyn, Chairman of the town council of Slobodka. Sinitsyn, accompanied by another local official, broke up a Pentecostal prayer and bible-reading session in a private home. Sinitsyn warned those in attendance that they were engaged in an unauthorized prayer meeting and threatened to contact the police should they continue to meet.

Throughout the reporting period, several Pentecostals were fined for illegally conducting and hosting religious services. According to the CRNA, convictions for such offenses were based on charges of either disturbing public order or illegally gathering without prior permission. The law allows people to gather to pray in private homes; however, it provides restrictions on holding rituals, rites, or ceremonies in such locations and requires prior permission from local authorities for such events.

On May 25, police broke up a Hindu prayer service that was held in a Minsk apartment. The police warned the participants that such activity was illegal for unregistered religious groups and that they would be arrested in the future if they were to continue to conduct such activity. On June 1, police broke up another unsanctioned prayer meeting held in another apartment and ordered participants to leave. As participants were leaving, police armed with machine guns arrived, and after searching the worshipers, forced them on the floor as the police conducted a search of the apartment, which reportedly resulted in heavy damage. On June 25, authorities again broke up another unsanctioned prayer meeting and questioned the owner of the apartment.

During the reporting period, authorities harassed, fined, and detained several Hare Krishnas for illegally distributing religious literature. The group reported that authorities initially detained some of their members for illegally distributing literature and then fined them for irregularities with their visas or other documentation. In October 2002, a Hare Krishna distributing literature in Gomel was detained for three days. According to members of the Hare Krishna community, in December 2002, plainclothesmen in Kobryn used force to detain several followers who were distributing religious literature. The individuals were later fined.

On May 21, 2001, authorities rearrested BAOC priest Ian Spasyuk while he was attempting to hold a service in the village of Radaulyany (Berestavitsky district). Authorities then summoned Spasyuk and his wife to a local court where, in a closed hearing and without the ability to call witnesses or obtain legal assistance, Spasyuk was detained and fined for petty hooliganism. Following direct government pressure and harassment of their respective religious organizations, BAOC priest Yan Spasyuk and the Light of Kaylasa leaders Sergei Akadanav and Tatyana Akadanava left the country in 2003.

On September 16, 2002, the Keston News Agency quoted Aleksandr Antonyuk, a member of the Pogranichny unregistered BAOC community, who reported that several members of the

BAOC were summoned to the local administration office in the town of Berastavitsa. Local authorities reportedly threatened BAOB members to either stop supporting Spasyuk or lose their jobs. Local authorities have denied these charges. In May Father Spasyuk's sister was fired from her job after Spasyuk declared his intention to seek political asylum. There has also been anecdotal evidence of Protestants being harassed at work due to their faith.

Members of the Light of Kaylasa that were fined for their participation in unsanctioned demonstrations and protests have reported that authorities have threatened them with confiscation of property and additional legal charges should their fines go unpaid. Authorities have also warned, threatened and harassed their family members for payment. On March 25, authorities forced the parents of one member of the group to pay the outstanding fine of their son. During the reporting period, members of the Light of Kaylasa reported being fired from their jobs due to their affiliation with the group. One member reported that she was fired because she was a "sektantka," member of a cult. Local authorities told employees of one company that their company would be closed since the company's director was a member of the group.

On October 2, 2002, local authorities issued a warning to Vasily Yurevich, Pastor of the New Life Church, for illegally protesting against the religion law. On November 8, 2002, the Keston News Agency reported that police detained two Roman Catholic demonstrators who protested against the new law on religion outside the Parliament building in Minsk. However, this report could not be confirmed by either the CRNA or the Roman Catholic Church.

On November 9, 2002, police and local authorities broke up a gathering of Scientologists in a Minsk apartment. Two people were fined approximately \$25 (50,000 rubles) for participating in an illegal gathering. Following an appeal by the group, a Minsk court overruled the fines on February 26.

On August 1, 2002, local authorities in the Grodno Oblast border town of Pogranichny demolished the church of the BAOB that they claimed was built illegally, because the building permit specified a private house. The church was demolished despite the fact that the community had been given construction permission in July 2001. Prior to the church's destruction, local authorities arrested three journalists at the site. There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

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

There are, for the most part, amicable relations among the registered, traditional, religious communities. According to an October 2002 poll conducted by the Independent Institute for Social, Economic, and Political Research, 57.7 percent of respondents favored equality between various religious groups, while 33 percent felt that the Orthodox Church should receive special government privileges. Anti-Semitism persisted and sentiment critical of minority faiths increased during the period covered by this report.

In two separate incidents in May and August 2002, skinheads attacked several foreign Jews in downtown Minsk. In one incident, police arrived at the scene but did not arrest the assailants. In September 2002, unknown assailants attacked a rabbi and his son near the Russian Embassy in Minsk. Local guards at the Embassy assisted the rabbi and notified the police who opened an investigation into the incident, but no significant action has been taken. On July 2, 2002, a synagogue in Gomel received a bomb threat from an unidentified individual. Police investigated the scene, but found no explosive device.

During the reporting period, unknown assailants assaulted several members of the Light of Kaylasa. One member of the group, Tatyana Zhilevich, was taken to a hospital with head injuries. On August 25, 2002, unknown individuals broke into a private apartment used by the group for religious services, vandalizing it and damaging the group's altar and other religious paraphernalia.

Jewish organizations continued to criticize the Government for failing to protect cemeteries and Holocaust memorials. In May and June, unknown assailants vandalized both Jewish and non-Jewish gravesites at three Gomel cemeteries. Although the authorities launched criminal investigations into the incidents, no arrests have been made. In April and July 2002, approximately 70 tombstones in a Jewish cemetery in Borisov and 19 tombstones in a Jewish cemetery in Minsk were vandalized. On July 16, 2002, local authorities in Borisov detained a teenager on suspicion of participating in the Borisov cemetery desecration. Given the fact that non-Jewish headstones were also damaged during these attacks, there is no indication that these acts were specifically motivated by anti-Semitism.

During the reporting period, unknown persons vandalized several Holocaust memorials in several cities in Belarus: On May 26, the Yama Holocaust memorial complex in Minsk; a Holocaust memorial in the town of Timkovichi; and a cemetery in Bobrusk; on August 18, 2002, a Holocaust memorial in Lida.

During the reporting period, unknown vandals destroyed crosses, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, that were erected at Kuropaty, an area used by the NKVD to murder over 300,000 people in the 1930s. The authorities made no attempts to find those responsible. In July 2002, Orthodox residents of the town of Ruba protested against the construction of a Pentecostal church.

According to the Anti-Defamation League and the World Jewish Congress, there are a number of small ultra-nationalist organizations on the fringes of society, and a number of newspapers regularly print anti-Semitic material. Anti-Semitic material from Russia also circulates widely.

The Jewish community is concerned by the concept of a "greater Slavic union" that is popular among nationalist organizations active in the country, including the Russian National Union (RNU), still active despite officially dissolving in 2000, and the National Bolshevik Party, another Russian extremist organization.

The official 2003 Belarusian Orthodox calendar, printed in Minsk, marks May 20 as the anniversary of the 1690 death of Gavriil Belostoksky, a young child who is alleged to have been murdered by Jews near Grodno. A May 20 prayer for Belostoksky makes reference to Jews as "real beasts" who allegedly kidnapped and murdered Belostoksky for religious purposes.

In January local Orthodox citizens in Stolin called for the Stolin District Council to remove Ivan Pashkevich from his position as a member of the lower house of the National Assembly. The petition claimed that Pashkevich had not fulfilled his promises to support the Belarusian Orthodox Church and accused him of "protecting neo-cults and sects." Pashkevich, a member of the Respublika opposition faction in the National Assembly and prominent figure in the Baptist community, has openly opposed the religion law and spoken out against government restriction of religious freedom.

In February unknown vandals spray-painted anti-Muslim graffiti in downtown Minsk. On July 5, 2002, unknown persons vandalized a Muslim cemetery in Slonim. On November 9, 2002, unknown assailants vandalized a mosque in Slonim.

On June 8, unknown individuals scrawled the word "antichrist" on the sign of the Living Faith Evangelical Church in Gomel. The Church was the target of similar attacks in August and November 2002. The Church reported that local authorities have been uncooperative in investigating these attacks.

On June 27, an unidentified car hit the vehicle of Alexander Sakovich, leader of the Union of Evangelical Faith Christians, and well-known opponent of the religion law, as he was driving in Minsk; Sakovich was unharmed. Shortly afterwards, Sakovich received a threatening call from an unknown person who warned him that next time he would not be so lucky.

There is no indication that the BOC has changed its view that it would cooperate only with religious faiths that have "historical roots" in the country. Members of most non-BOC faiths have expressed their opposition to the religion law and have openly criticized the law's restrictions and vagueness. On June 18, the Union of Evangelical Faith Christians announced that in protest to the law's passage, the group will not seek reregistration.

Prior to the passage of the law on religion, representatives of many religious faiths, including traditional and nontraditional, established the Civil Initiative for Religious Freedom. The group actively opposed the law on religion and other government restrictions on religious groups. In August 2002, the group published "The White Book," which detailed the Government's many abuses of religious freedom and information about the religion law.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy continues to promote and monitor religious freedom as part of frequent discussions on the poor human rights situation in the country. The US Embassy regularly coordinated its efforts to promote religious freedom with Western diplomatic missions in Minsk. Embassy staff maintained regular contact with representatives of religious groups and government officials responsible for religious affairs.

The Embassy has hosted several roundtables of religious leaders to discuss relevant issues pertaining to religious freedom and government harassment. In October and December 2002, visiting officials from the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development met with representatives of several religious groups to ascertain the religious freedom situation. The U.S. Embassy also assisted in making arrangements for delegations of foreign organizations concerned with religious freedom. Embassy staff also attended trials and demonstrations of those protesting against the Government's repressive policies on religious groups.

During the reporting period, the U.S. Government issued several press releases on religious freedom issues. On June 25, 2002, the U.S. Embassy expressed its concern with the draft law on religion and called upon the Government to take steps to ensure that all religious groups be allowed to worship freely. On November 1, 2002, the Department of State issued a public statement criticizing the passage of the law, citing the law's numerous restrictive elements. The U.S. delegation to the OSCE criticized the Government's poor religious freedom record in an October 2002 public statement. The U.S. Embassy released public statements condemning the passage of the law on religion and called upon the Government to ensure that all citizens have the right to worship freely. On May 31, the U.S. Embassy condemned the vandalizing of the Holocaust memorials and Jewish cemeteries in several cities.

Despite promises to discuss religious freedom concerns with the U.S. Embassy, the Government took steps either to avoid discussing these concerns or prevent Embassy staff from reporting on religious freedom issues. On October 7, 2002, the CRNA unexpectedly cancelled a meeting between CRNA officials and a visiting U.S. Government official and the Ambassador which had been scheduled well in advance. On October 9, 2002, three U.S. Embassy staff and a Department of State official, having stopped at the demolition site of the BAOC Church, were detained for four hours in the town of Pogranichny, allegedly for illegally entering the border zone. A local employee of the Embassy, who was accompanying the delegation who was scheduled to meet the mayor of Pogranichny to discuss U.S. Government concerns over the destruction of the BAOC Church, received an official warning for failing to provide personal identification to local authorities.

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