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**2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:
Croatia**

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CROATIA

The Constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religion and free public profession of religious conviction, and the Government respects these rights in practice.

The overall situation for religious freedom improved somewhat during the period covered by this report, with representatives of various religious communities pointing to the election of a democratic coalition government in January 2000 as the first positive step towards a fuller respect for religious freedom. Officials of the new Government expressed a commitment to eliminating discrimination and to improving respect for human rights; however, the Government's approach thus far has been ad hoc, addressing problems as they arise and resolving issues with individual religious communities rather than setting uniform non-discriminatory standards and practices for all communities.

Notions of religion and ethnicity are closely intertwined in society. During the past 10 years religious institutions of all faiths have been targets of violence, reflecting the conflicts underway. Such incidents still occur, particularly in the Danubian region (eastern Slavonia), where there were persistent reports of vandalism directed against Serb Orthodox buildings and cemeteries.

The U.S. Government continues to encourage the Government to respect religious freedom in practice. The Secretary of State met with Catholic Archbishop Bozanic in February 2000. Embassy officials frequently meet with representatives of religious and ethnic minority communities and with government officials to promote respect for religious freedom and protection of human rights.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion**Legal/Policy Framework**

The Constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religion and free public profession of religious conviction, and the Government respects these rights in practice.

While there is no official state religion, the Roman Catholic Church receives state financing to support pensions for priests and nuns through the government-managed pension and health funds. Other religious communities still do not have such an agreement with the State, nor is there a law that regulates these issues. (Orthodox priests and imams

have been paying their contributions to the health and pension funds from their own resources, in order to be covered by a pension plan.) In the past, the dividing line between the Catholic Church and the State often was blurred, as the then-ruling HDZ party periodically attempted to identify itself more closely with the Catholic Church. However, parliamentary elections in January 2000 brought to power a democratic Government committed to respect human rights and to improve cooperation with all religious communities. Since Archbishop Josip Bozanic took office in 1997, the Catholic Church has sought an independent role for itself and was at times openly critical of the previous government. In November 1999, the Croatian Catholic Bishops' Conference refused to endorse the HDZ party in the January 2000 elections, calling on the faithful to vote freely and to overcome the "old, intolerant one-party mentality."

Representatives of several religious communities state that the overall situation has improved somewhat during the reporting period. The election of a democratic government in January 2000 is a positive step toward greater respect for religious freedom. While the new Government has expressed interest in eliminating religious discrimination, its approach is ad hoc, treating problems as they arise and addressing specific issues (for example, the validity of religious marriage ceremonies) with individual religious communities rather than setting uniform non-discriminatory standards and practices. No law on religious communities has been adopted as yet by the new Government to set general and uniform standards for all religious communities, although several religious leaders expressed hope that one would be passed soon.

Religious Demography

The religious breakdown of the country is approximately: Roman Catholic, 85 percent; Orthodox Christian, 6 percent; Muslim, 1 percent; Jewish, less than 1 percent; other, 4 percent; atheist, 2 percent. (These numbers are approximate because no national census has been conducted since 1991, before the recent conflict and its associated population shifts.) These statistics correlate closely with the country's ethnic makeup. The Orthodox can be found in Serb areas, notably cities and the war-affected regions, and other minority religions can be found mostly in urban areas. Most immigrants are Roman Catholic ethnic Croats. Protestants from a number of denominations and foreign clergy and missionaries actively practice and proselytize.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

No formal restrictions are imposed on religious groups, and all religious communities are free to conduct public services and to open and run social and charitable institutions.

Facilitating the return of refugees is a challenge for the new Government, which has made progress in a number of areas relating to returns. However, many ethnic Serbs who wish to return to Croatia, including Serbian Orthodox clergy, continued to encounter difficulties

in obtaining citizenship and travel documents. There were no reports of specific discrimination against Orthodox clergy beyond that faced by other ethnic Serb citizen refugees. However, religion and ethnicity are so closely intertwined in the country that it is difficult to distinguish between ethnic discrimination and religious discrimination against Serbs, who are Orthodox Christians, and against Muslims. A pattern of often open and severe discrimination continues against ethnic Serbs, and, at times, other minorities in a wide number of areas, including the administration of justice, employment, housing, and freedom of movement. The then-HDZ party government often maintained a double standard of treatment based on ethnicity. Although in recent years the Government had discriminated against a particular group of Muslims in the issuance of citizenship documents, the Government began recognizing their citizenship in autumn 1999. In the area of Topusko, most cases have been resolved of the approximately 2,500 Muslims who for several years were unable to obtain citizenship because their period of residency was interrupted by the military conflict.

Protestants and foreign clergy actively practice and proselytize, as do representatives of Eastern religions. Missionaries from a number of different groups are present in the country, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Greek-Catholics, Pentecostals, Hare Krishnas, and a wide range of evangelical Protestant Christians (including Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, Church of Christ, and various nondenominational organizations, such as the Campus Crusades for Christ).

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints reported difficulties in obtaining missionary visas. It reported receiving only about 30 visas of a requested 50, resulting in several of its missionaries being obliged to work on a series of 90-day tourist visas. However, Baptist missionaries reported that their longstanding difficulties in obtaining missionary visas were resolved, in part due to pressure from the international community on the previous government, and they obtained the visas in fall 1999.

The Government requires that religious training be provided in schools, although attendance is optional. Schools filling the necessary quota of seven minority students per class offered separate religion classes for these students. In classes not meeting this quota, minority students could fulfill the religion requirement by bringing a certificate that they had received classes from their religious community. Generally, the lack of resources, minority students, and qualified teachers impeded catechism in minority faiths, and the Catholic catechism was the one predominantly offered. Although religious training is not obligatory, in the past some students reportedly felt pressured to participate. Jewish officials noted that basic information provided to students about Judaism was inaccurate, and their offers to improve the material continued to go unheeded.

Missionaries do not operate registered schools, but the Mormon community provides free English lessons, which normally are followed by some sort of religious class. The Muslim community has a secondary

school in Zagreb; however, the Ministry of Education continued to refuse to recognize the diploma conferred upon graduation; a lawsuit to resolve the matter has not been decided. Approximately 20 students per year graduate from the school. In a positive development, in September 1999, the Government directed public schools that reached the minimum quota of Muslim students to sign work contracts with Muslim instructors. In the past, Muslim catechism instructors were not paid by the Government, whereas Roman Catholic catechism teachers were.

The Ministry of Defense employs 19 Catholic priests to minister to Catholics in the military. However, neither Orthodox nor Muslim clerics were given this opportunity. A Catholic priest is present and gives a blessing at the oath-giving ceremony upon entering the army, but other clerics have not been invited to participate.

The Catholic Church operates the country's only private national radio station, Catholic Radio, which is financed by private contributions. The Jewish community reports no restrictions on religious broadcasting. Jewish topics are covered periodically on weekly religious programming of state broadcaster Croatian State Radio and Television (HRT), for example, at times of Jewish holidays. The Muslim community has 4.5 minutes of radio broadcast time per month, as well as 4.5 minutes per month on Radio Zagreb. In addition, the Bairam ceremony from the Zagreb mosque is broadcast annually on television.

Muslims have the right to observe their religious holidays. They are granted a paid holiday for one Bairam and have the right to observe the other as well (although they are not paid for the day).

There is no government-sponsored ecumenical activity, nor is there funding for such efforts. Ecumenical activity is initiated by the religious leaders themselves (see Section II).

Governmental Abuses of Religious Freedom

Religion and ethnicity are closely intertwined in society, and many incidents of discrimination appear motivated by ethnicity rather than religion or religious doctrine.

The previous HDZ Government implemented property restitution in a discriminatory manner: the Government signed a concordat with the Vatican in 1998 that provided for the return of all Catholic Church property confiscated by the Communist regime after 1945. This agreement stipulates that the Government would return seized properties or compensate the Church where return is impossible. Some progress has been made with some returnable properties being restituted, but there has been no compensation to date for nonreturnable properties. Three other agreements with the Vatican regulate Catholic marriages, public school catechism, and military chaplains.

There have been no such agreements between the Government and other religious groups. The Orthodox community has filed several requests for the return of seized properties, and some cases have been resolved

successfully, particularly cases involving buildings in urban centers. However, several buildings in downtown Zagreb have not been returned, nor have properties that belonged to monasteries, such as arable land and forest. This uneven progress may be the result of a slow judicial system rather than a systematic effort to deny restitution of Orthodox properties. In December 1999, the Government returned to the Jewish community a site in downtown Zagreb where the main synagogue was located until its destruction in World War II. However other Jewish properties, including some Zagreb buildings, have not been returned. The Jewish community identifies property return as one of its top priorities.

Catholic marriages are recognized by the State, eliminating the need to register them in the civil registry office. The Muslim and Jewish communities, seeking similar status, have raised this issue repeatedly with the Government, but there has been no resolution to date.

Dinko Sakic, commander of Croatia's Jasenovac concentration camp in 1944, was convicted in October 1999 of crimes against humanity and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment, the maximum possible sentence. Sakic was extradited from Argentina in 1998. The Jasenovac camp, site of a memorial and museum, was badly damaged during the recent conflict and renovation is ongoing. In April 2000, a government delegation, led by the Minister of Culture, attended a commemoration ceremony there that also was attended by several leaders of ethnic and religious minority communities.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion 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.

Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

Constitutional amendments passed in May 2000 added Bosnian Muslims and Albanians to the list of officially recognized minorities. Muslims were removed from this list by the previous government in 1998, despite being the second largest minority in the country after Serbs.

In April 2000, the new Government established a Commission for Religious Minorities under the authority of Deputy Prime Minister Goran Granic. This Commission replaced a similar, ineffective one under the previous regime. The new commission held its first session in April 2000 with representatives from several religious communities and government bodies, soliciting suggestions from the religious communities and presenting plans to draw up a law on religious minorities. However, only "traditional" denominations were invited to the first meeting, and smaller groups such as the Mormons and Hindus,

were excluded. The Commission has not achieved concrete results to date.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Notions of religion and ethnicity are closely intertwined in society, and religion often was used to identify non-Croats and to single them out for discriminatory practices. This caused religious institutions to be targets of violence. In the past 10 years, religious institutions of all faiths have been targets of violence. Such incidents still occur, particularly in the tense Danubian region (eastern Slavonia), where there were persistent reports of vandalism directed against Serb Orthodox buildings and cemeteries. Of 14 incidents recorded by international observers during the period covered by this report, at least 11 were directed against Serbs or Serb Orthodox structures, including the October 1999 assault on a 69-year old Orthodox priest who was beaten at a Vukovar bus stop by a Croat youth. The youth was arrested quickly and in November 1999 was convicted of "disturbing public order" and fined approximately \$80. Also, in December 1999, an Orthodox cemetery was vandalized in Vukovar; in January 2000, two crucifixes were damaged on the property of the local Orthodox priest in Tenja, and windows were broken at an Orthodox church in Borovo. No arrests were made in any of these incidents.

Two incidents of vandalism directed against Jewish structures were reported throughout the country, including the August 1999 damage to 15 headstones at a Jewish cemetery in Koprivnica and an April 2000 incident in which swastikas were painted on the wall of the Jewish center in Zagreb. No arrests were made in these cases.

Since Catholic Archbishop Bozanic took office in 1997, the Catholic Church has sought a more proactive role in advocating reconciliation. Catholic Radio includes a monthly program on ecumenism, inviting speakers from other religious communities. The Catholic Church has initiated several meetings with Orthodox clergy from Serbia, including a February 18, 2000, bishops' meeting at Novi Sad, Serbia. Bozanic has been active in publicly promoting the return of (mostly Serb Orthodox) refugees and in ecumenical reconciliation efforts.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. Government actions have been aimed at encouraging the Government to respect religious freedom in practice and at supporting the efforts of the Catholic Church to foster a constructive environment in post-conflict society. The Secretary of State met with Archbishop Bozanic on February 18, 2000 and noted the positive role played by the Catholic Church during the period of transition to a new government. Embassy officials have frequent meetings at all levels with representatives of the ethnic Serb (Orthodox) community as well as the Jewish and Muslim communities and are engaged in the promotion of human rights, including the religious rights, of these groups. Embassy officials meet and hold frequent discussions at all levels with government officials about respect for religious freedom and issues of

discrimination against religious communities. The Embassy is a leader of the "article 11 commission," a group of 21 international missions in the country that deals directly with issues of ethnic and religious reconciliation and human rights.

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