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COTE D'IVOIRE 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The 2016 constitution continues to provide for freedom of religious belief and worship to all, consistent with law and order, and prohibits religious discrimination in employment. It emphasizes that religious tolerance is fundamental to the nation's unity, national reconciliation, and social cohesion. It forbids speech that encourages religious hatred. The government denied registration to some religious groups that it stated submitted forged documents as part of their application. As in previous years, the government organized and funded Hajj pilgrimages for Muslims and pilgrimages to France and Israel for Christians. The government continued to include Muslim and Catholic leaders in political reconciliation efforts. The central leadership body of the Independent Electoral Commission (CEI) included positions for Muslim and Christian religious leaders.

On March 13, a group of six attackers killed 22 people and injured 33 others in Grand Bassam. The terrorists allegedly shouted "Allahu Akbar." Several religious leaders condemned the attack and encouraged peaceful relations among all religious groups. The president and first lady attended an interfaith ceremony on the Day of Remembrance for those killed during the terrorist attack at which both a priest and an imam said prayers for the victims and an indigenous priest made an offering.

U.S. embassy representatives discussed the importance of religious tolerance with political figures in the government and the opposition. The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives met with religious leaders and groups throughout the year to discuss the role they could play in maintaining a climate of tolerance and religious freedom. The embassy organized an hour-long radio interview, which was broadcast nationwide, with a Muslim American who addressed values of religious tolerance and diversity. In April the embassy hosted a seminar on countering violent extremism that brought together religious leaders, security and government officials, civil society leaders, academics, and media. One of the panels emphasized the peaceful coexistence of religions in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 23.7 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the most recent census in 2014, 42 percent is Muslim, 34

percent Christian, and 4 percent adherents of indigenous religious beliefs. Many Christians and Muslims also practice some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs.

Traditionally, the north is associated with Islam and the south with Christianity, although adherents of both religious groups live throughout the country.

Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Harrists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Southern Baptists, Copts, adherents of the Celestial Church of Christ, and members of the Assemblies of God. Muslim groups include Sunnis, Shia, and Ahmadis. Other religious groups include Buddhists, Bahais, Rastafarians, followers of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and Bossonists, who follow traditions of the Akan ethnic group.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The new constitution adopted during the year continued to stipulate a secular state that respects all beliefs and treats all individuals equally under the law, regardless of religion. It prohibits religious discrimination in public and private employment and provides for freedom of conscience and religious belief and worship consistent with the law, the rights of others, national security, and public order. It prohibits "propaganda" that encourages religious hatred. It recognizes the right of political asylum in the country for individuals persecuted for religious reasons.

The Ministry of Interior's Department of Faith-Based Organizations is charged with promoting dialogue among religious groups and between the government and religious groups, providing administrative support to groups trying to become established, monitoring religious activities, and managing state sponsored religious pilgrimages and registration of new religious groups.

The law requires all religious groups to register with the government. Groups must submit an application to the Department of Faith-Based Organizations. The application must include the group's bylaws, names of the founding members and board members, date of founding, and general assembly minutes. The department investigates the organization to ensure the religious group has no members or purpose deemed politically subversive and that no members are deprived of their civic and political rights. There are no penalties prescribed for groups that do not register, but those that register benefit from government support. For example, the

government provides free access to state-run television and radio for religious programming to registered religious groups that request it. Registered religious groups are not charged import taxes on devotional items such as religious books and religious items such as rosaries.

Religious education is not included in the public school curriculum, but is often included in private schools affiliated with a particular faith.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The government refused to register some religious groups because of internal disputes involving applicant groups and the submission of forged documents as part of the applications, according to an official at the Department of Faith-Based Organizations. Specifically, he said the department received some minutes from religious groups' founding general assemblies that appeared to be forged and did not accurately reflect the organizations from which they were allegedly sent.

The government continued to fund and to organize Hajj pilgrimages for Muslims and pilgrimages to Israel and France for Christians, as well as local pilgrimages for members of independent African Christian churches.

The government included prominent Muslim, Catholic, and other Christian religious leaders in political and social reconciliation efforts. A Catholic bishop and an imam held roles as vice presidents of the Dialogue, Truth, and Reconciliation Commission and subsequently of the National Commission for Reconciliation and Victims Compensation. The Catholic Church and the Muslim community both had representatives as commissioners on the Independent Electoral Commission (CEI).

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On March 13, a group of six attackers killed 22 people and injured 33 others in Grand Bassam. The terrorists allegedly shouted "Allahu Akbar" during the attack; Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Al-Mourabitoun claimed responsibility for the attack. Several religious leaders responded to the issue. The High Council of Imams expressed its deep sorrow after the "horrifying" attack and denounced the "barbaric methods" of the extremists. Members of the Ahmadiyya Islamic Mission Community publicly denounced it as "an atrocious act" after news reports

suggested that a leaflet distributed the day of the attack was linked to their community. The Catholic Church called for “peaceful coexistence” among citizens.

The National Forum of Religious Confessions held a peace conference a week after the attack, which included Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, and Seventh-day Adventist religious leaders. A spokesman and member of the National Islamic Council stated at the conference that “no religion should lead somebody to kill his or her fellow beings.”

On the Day of Remembrance for those killed during the terrorist attack in Grand Bassam, held a week after the attack, the government hosted a public interfaith ceremony attended by the president and the first lady at which a priest and an imam said prayers for the victims and an indigenous priest made an offering.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives frequently discussed the importance of religious tolerance with political figures in the government and the opposition. In January the Ambassador hosted the Dr. Martin Luther King prayer breakfast that brought together government officials from the Ministry of Communication and the Ministry of Regional Integration and approximately 40 religious leaders to discuss the role of religious tolerance in promoting reconciliation and nonviolence. In May the Ambassador visited the Mayor of Grand Bassam to thank him for his assistance on the day of the attacks, lay down a wreath to the victims, and emphasize the need for religious tolerance.

The Ambassador and U.S. embassy representatives met with religious and civil society leaders to discuss religious freedom, tolerance, and reconciliation. In March the embassy hosted a remote video conference between a former U.S. diplomat and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom and tolerance and the important role religious leaders play in preventing radicalization of young people. The embassy provided financial and technical assistance support to a civil society platform of election observers that included a multidenominational council of religious leaders to represent the religious community perspective in the political discourse. During the October constitutional referendum and the December legislative elections, the platform promoted responsible rhetoric and urged religious leaders to encourage peace.

Under an agreement between Voice of America (VOA) and Al-Bayane Radio, VOA's French-language *Dialogue des Religions* (*Dialogue of Religions*) continued to reach millions of listeners across the country with its weekly broadcast on the Islamic radio station. *Dialogue des Religions* is an interactive program featuring a host and guests – often religious scholars or journalists – who discussed religious issues in the news and answered listeners' questions on various facets of religion. The embassy launched a radio program called *Hello, America!* in partnership with the Al-Bayane Islamic radio station. The first edition of the program in October featured an interview with an American official who is Muslim and discussed the values of religious tolerance and diversity.

On April 14, the embassy hosted a seminar on countering violent extremism in the country, which brought together religious leaders, security and government officials, civil society leaders, academics, and media. One of the panels emphasized the peaceful coexistence of religions in the country.