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International Religious Freedom Report

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
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The Transitional Constitutional Act provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by the report. While in general government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion, the Government arrested the leader of an indigenous religious group for security reasons.

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

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 10,745 square miles and its population is approximately 6.2 million. Although reliable statistics on the number of followers of various religions are not available, a Roman Catholic official estimated that 60 percent of the population are Catholic, with the largest concentration of adherents located in the center and south of the country. A Muslim leader estimated that up to 10 percent of the population are Muslim, mostly in urban areas. The remainder of the population belongs to other Christian churches, practices traditional indigenous religions, or has no religious affiliation. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of small indigenous groups not affiliated with any major religion, some of which have won adherents by promising miracle cures for HIV/AIDS and other ailments. Many citizens regularly attend religious services.

Foreign missionary groups of many faiths are active in the country, including Baha'is, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Quakers (Friends Church), and Seventh-Day Adventists.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Transitional Constitutional Act provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. There is no state religion; however, the Catholic Church, which represents approximately 60 percent of the population, is predominant.

The Government requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which keeps track of their leadership and activities. The Government requires that religious groups maintain a headquarters in the country. While there is no law that accords tax exemptions to religious groups, the Government often waives taxes on imported religious articles used by churches and also often waives taxes on the importation by churches of goods destined for social development purposes. These exemptions are negotiated with the Finance Ministry on a case-by-case basis, and there is no indication of religious bias in the awarding of such exemptions.

The heads of major religious organizations are accorded diplomatic status. Foreign missionary groups openly promote their religious beliefs. The Government has welcomed their development assistance.

The Government recognizes religious holidays that primarily are Catholic, including Assumption, Ascension, and All Saint's Day, as well as Christmas.

Restrictions of Religious Freedom

In general government policy and practice contributed to the generally unrestricted practice of religion.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On October 3, 2000, soldiers shot and killed Antonio Bargiggia, a Catholic brother from Italy, who ran a hospital in Mutoyi. On October 19, a soldier, Napoleon Manirakiza, was convicted of killing Bargiggia and was executed for murder without having had legal representation during his trial or a chance to appeal his conviction.

In April 2001, the Government arrested the leader of an indigenous religious group and closed down his church after the leader's claims to divinity led to repeated clashes with a rival leader's adherents. The Government claimed to be motivated by concern for public order rather than religious bias. The leader's trial was pending at the end of the period covered by this report. There were no other cases of clergy being arrested or churches closed for religious reasons.

On June 9, 2001, FDD rebels killed Anglican archdeacon Jodi Beheda and two other persons in an ambush on their van near Makamba. On June 11, 2001, rebels killed one nun in an ambush on a vehicle in the area of Mutambara belonging to the Roman Catholic bishop of Bururi.

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 their practice of religion, citizens generally tolerate other religions. Disputes between religious groups are rare, apart from minor disagreements over competition for followers.

In October 2000, there were reports that unidentified attackers killed an Italian nun in Gitega. Observers believe that the attack was criminal, not political in nature. No person had been arrested by the end of the period covered by this report.

Catholic Bishops drew up a joint message calling for dialog and compromise to end conflict, and the message was read in Catholic churches throughout the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

[End]

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