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Macedonia, Former Yugoslav Republic of

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was improvement in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The August 13 Framework Agreement, concluded in 2001 to end Macedonia's ethnic Albanian insurgency, contained broad constitutional and legislative reforms focused on greater minority rights. At the beginning of the implementation of this agreement and during the 2002 election campaign, religious issues increasingly were politicized. Following the October 31, 2002, formation of the Government, its representatives mitigated ethnic and religious tensions. In numerous public settings, officials reduced the level of rhetoric and consistently promoted reconciliation. The absence of provocative actions and public statements by government officials, which characterized the previous government, has improved respect for religious freedom. Additionally, there were no attacks on any churches or mosques during the period covered by this report. The law places some limits on religious practice by restricting the establishment of places of worship and restricting where contributions may be made.

The generally amicable relationship among the various religious communities contributed to religious freedom.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 9,781 square miles, and its population is approximately 2 million. The country has two major religions: Orthodox Christianity and Islam. Nominally, approximately 66 percent of the population are Macedonian Orthodox, approximately 30 percent are Muslim, approximately 1 percent are Roman Catholic, and approximately 3 percent are of other faiths (largely various Protestant denominations). There is also a small Jewish community in Skopje. Religious participation tends to focus on major holidays or life cycle events.

Numerous foreign missionaries are active and represent a wide range of faiths. Many of these missionaries enter the country in connection with other work, often charitable or medical. Several Protestant missionary groups and members of Jehovah's Witnesses are active.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. However, the law places some limits on religious practices, including the establishment of places of worship and the collection of contributions. As part of the August 2001 Framework Agreement, which ended Macedonia's ethnic Albanian insurgency, the Constitution was amended to include mention of the Jewish community and the Methodist Church. None of these communities has official status or privileges.

The constitutional provision for religious freedom is refined further in the 1997 Law on Religious

Communities and Religious Groups. This law designates the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic community, the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish community, and the Methodist Church as religious communities, and all other religions as religious groups. However, there is no legal differentiation between religious communities and groups. In 1999 the Constitutional Court struck down several provisions of the 1997 law, and in practice the remaining provisions are not enforced consistently.

The Government requires that religious groups be registered. The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups contained a number of specific requirements for the registration of religious groups that were struck down by the Constitutional Court in 1999. Consequently, there was considerable confusion over which procedures still applied, and several foreign religious bodies experienced delays in their efforts to register. This law tends to favor traditional denominations, registered as communities. Other denominations registered as religious "groups" and had to undergo stricter scrutiny by the Republic Commission for Relations with the Religious Communities, compared to traditional religious communities or organizations. During the period covered by this report, the process remained slow and cumbersome. In practice religious groups need to register to obtain permits to build churches, and to request visas for foreigners and other permits from the Government. During 2002 religious groups were granted legal registration and there were no reports that any groups were denied registration. For example, Campus Crusade for Christ applied and was granted registration by the Commission, with its workers receiving religious visas.

The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups also requires that foreigners carrying out religious work and religious rites be registered with the Government's Commission on Relations with the Religious Communities. The Government does not restrict or actively monitor new groups or advise the public on them. The Government no longer keeps a count of registered religious groups and communities.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

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

The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups also places some limitations on the collection of contributions by restricting them only to places where religious rites and activities are conducted; however, in practice these provisions of the law are not enforced.

During the period covered by this report, the Government elected in September 2002 moved away from the previous Government's policy of politicizing religious issues. The new Government has encouraged inter-ethnic and by extension, inter-religious reconciliation. During and after its election campaign and following, the Government has on numerous occasions called for ethnic and religious tolerance; such statements have been broadcast on television news and in print media. In May Prime Minister Crvenkovski, together with representatives from various religious communities, addressed a conference on tolerance organized by the Holocaust Fund of Macedonia. The absence of provocative actions and rhetoric, which characterized the previous government, has been a significant factor in the improvement for respect for religious freedom.

Children below the age of 10 years may not receive religious instruction without the permission of their parents or guardians. A new law provides for religious education in the schools on a

voluntary basis. The Government continues to develop the implementation guidelines.

The law specifies that primary school children must be taught in the Macedonian language, and may not be taught by foreigners, even if the children themselves are foreigners and do not speak Macedonian. Foreigners also are not permitted to operate educational institutions, manage classrooms, or give grades to non-citizens. In September 2002, authorities moved to shut down the Timothy Academy, an evangelical Christian academy operated by foreigners for foreign children. In December 2002, the new Government granted work visas to the school's employees and in June the Academy was granted registration as a nongovernmental organization.

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

The issue of restitution of religious properties expropriated by the former Yugoslav Government has still not been resolved fully. Some progress was made in restitution of previously state-owned religious property. Many churches and mosques had extensive grounds or other properties that were expropriated by the Communist regime. Virtually all churches and mosques have been returned to the ownership of the appropriate religious community, but that is not the case for many of the other properties. Often restitution or compensation claims are complicated by the fact that the seized properties have changed hands many times or have been developed. In view of the country's very limited financial resources, it is unlikely that religious communities will gain restitution of many of the expropriated properties. Nevertheless, on August 28, 2002, the Ministry of Finance and the Jewish Community reached a satisfactory settlement on the restitution of Jewish communal property after more than 6-years of talks. The Ministry of Finance agreed to return to the Jewish Community three buildings in Bitola, one piece of real estate in Skopje, and bonds valued at approximately \$2.76 million (165 million denars).

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were no reports of destruction of places of worship during the period covered by this report. However, many places were not fully intact as a result of the 2001 conflict. On August 15, a Sunni Muslim group illegally established an ongoing, armed presence in a Bektashi religious facility—the Arabati Baba Tekke in Tetovo—home to a small, active Bektashi Islamic community, and asserted a claim to ownership of the facility, a hotel, and two restaurants on the property's grounds. The occupying group may have received the tacit support of the then-governing political parties VMRO-DPMNE and DPA; the owner of the restaurants and hotel were reputed to be an opposition supporter. At the end of the period covered by this report, the ongoing ownership dispute between the Bektashi religious sect and the Islamic Community over the Bektashi religious facility remained unresolved. Although armed interlopers had left by year's end under international community pressure, fundamentalist Islamic leaders still held services on the Tekke grounds five times per day.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally tolerant relationship among the various religious communities continued to

contribute to religious freedom although it has been tested as a result of inter-ethnic tensions. In November 2002, a U.S. Institute of Peace-sponsored group of visiting U.S. religious scholars met with representatives of the religious communities to discuss the formation of an Inter-religious Council.

In May the Holocaust Fund sponsored an international conference focused on the importance of religious tolerance. Representatives of some religious communities as well as the Prime Minister attended the conference and addressed the gathering.

The religious communities in the country often reflect an ethnic identity. Specifically, most Muslims are ethnic Albanians. However, there are a number of ethnic Macedonians who are Muslim. Ethnic Macedonians contend that they often are associated with the policies of ethnic Albanian Muslims, which they do not support. Societal discrimination is more likely to be based upon ethnic bias than upon religious prejudice.

During the period covered by this report, there was a dramatic decrease in vandalism of religious properties, and there were no reports of destruction of places of worship. In December 2002, two Orthodox churches in the villages of Setole and Otunja, which had already been looted in 2001, were vandalized.

No further progress has been made in investigating 2001 attacks on Muslim places of worship, including the June 2001 attack on the Bitola mosque and the August 2001 burning of the Prilep Mosque.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

During the period covered by this report, the Ambassador and Embassy staff met with leaders and representatives of the various religious communities, as well as with government officials, to address religious freedom issues and support the new Government's policy of ethnic and religious tolerance.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2003/24421pf.htm)