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BELARUS 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution grants individuals freedom to profess and practice any religious belief but prohibits religious activities directed against the sovereignty of the state, its constitutional system, and “civic harmony.” The law recognizes the “determining role” of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC), and a concordat grants the BOC rights and privileges not granted to other religious groups, although the law also acknowledges the historical importance of the “traditional” faiths of Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and evangelical Lutheranism. By law all registered religious groups are required to seek permits to hold events outside of their premises, including proselytizing, and must obtain prior governmental approval to import and distribute religious literature. The law bans all religious activity by unregistered groups. The government continued to detain or fine individuals for organizing or hosting unauthorized religious meetings in private homes, for proselytizing, and for refusing to serve in the military despite the enactment of a law permitting alternative service. The government also continued to deny registration to some minority religious groups and stated it might revoke the registration of some Jehovah’s Witnesses communities. Some minority religious groups remained reluctant to apply for registration because members were unwilling to provide their names as part of the registration process out of fear of harassment and punishment by the authorities. The government continued its surveillance of unregistered religious communities. According to independent religious experts, many communities remained reluctant to report abuses and restrictions out of fear of punishment. Prison authorities denied Muslim and Protestant clergy, as well as clergy from nontraditional faiths, access to prisoners of their faiths, while they granted such access to BOC and Roman Catholic clergy. Protestant and other minority religious groups reported the authorities continued to limit their ability to obtain or convert property for religious use.

Jewish community leaders continued to express concern over the BOC’s annual commemoration of a young child allegedly killed by Jews near Hrodna in 1690 as one of its saints and martyrs. There were reports of vandalism at several Jewish memorials.

U.S. embassy officers met with the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs (PRRNA) to discuss the religious situation in the country, including requirements for registration and operation of religious groups, visa regulations for foreign clergy, and distribution of religious literature. The Charge

d’Affaires and other embassy officers met with Jewish groups to discuss anti-Semitism and the preservation of Jewish religious heritage. Embassy officers also met with Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKON), and other groups, as well as with civil society activists and lawyers for religious groups, to discuss government restrictions on registration and the activities of minority religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.6 million (July 2016 estimate). According to a January 2016 survey by the state Information and Analytical Center of the Presidential Administration, approximately 53 percent of the adult population belongs to the BOC and 6 percent to the Roman Catholic Church. Eight percent of the adult population said they were atheist, and 22 percent said they were not sure. Smaller religious groups together constituting approximately 2 percent of the population include Jews, Muslims, Greek Catholics (“Uniates”), Old Believers (both those who practice their faith with priests, usually termed “priestist,” and those who practice their faith without priests, usually termed “priestless”) and other Orthodox groups besides the BOC, Lutherans, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Apostolic Christians, Presbyterians, other Protestant groups, Armenian Apostolics, Latin Catholics, ISKON, Bahais, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Buddhists. Jewish groups state there are between 30,000 and 40,000 Jews. Ethnic Poles, who constitute approximately 3 percent of the population, tend to be Roman Catholic.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution grants individuals the freedom to profess any religious beliefs and to participate in the performance of acts of worship not prohibited by law. It stipulates all faiths are equal before the law. The constitution states relations between the state and religious organizations shall be regulated by the law “with regard to their influence on the formation of the spiritual, cultural, and state traditions of the Belarusian people.” It prohibits activities by religious groups that are directed against the country’s sovereignty, its constitutional system, and civic harmony, involve a violation of civil rights and liberties, “impede the execution of state, public, and family duties” by its citizens, or are detrimental to public health and morality. The constitution states the law shall determine the conditions for

exemption from military service and the performance of alternative service as a substitute.

The Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs (OPRRNA) regulates all religious matters.

The law recognizes the “determining role” of the BOC in the development of the traditions of the people as well as the historical importance of religious groups commonly referred to as “traditional” faiths: Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and evangelical Lutheranism. The law does not consider newer religious groups or groups such as the priestless Old Believers and Calvinist churches, which have roots in the country dating to the 17th century, as “traditional” faiths.

A concordat between the government and the BOC provides the BOC with autonomy in its internal affairs, freedom to perform religious rites and other activities, and a special relationship with the state. The concordat recognizes the BOC’s “influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural, and national traditions of the Belarusian people.” Although it states the agreement does not limit the religious freedom of other religious groups, the concordat calls for the government and the BOC to combat unnamed “pseudo-religious structures that present a danger to individuals and society.” The BOC, unlike other religious communities, receives subsidies from the state. In addition, the BOC possesses the exclusive right to use the word “orthodox” in its title and to use as its symbol the double-barred image of the Cross of Saint Euphrosyne, the country’s patron saint.

The concordat also serves as the framework for agreements between the BOC and individual state agencies. There are at least a dozen such agreements, including an agreement with the Ministry of Education (MOE) covering cooperation on education through 2020 and providing for joint projects for the “spiritual and moral education” of students based on BOC traditions and history.

The law establishes three tiers of registered religious groups: religious communities, religious associations, and national religious associations. Religious communities must include at least 20 persons over the age of 18 who live in one or several adjoining areas. Religious associations must include at least 10 religious communities, one of which must have been active in the country for at least 20 years, and may be constituted only by a national-level religious association. National religious associations may be formed only when they comprise active religious communities in at least four of the country’s six regions.

According to the government data collected in 2015, the most recent available, there are 26 religious faiths and denominations registered in the country, encompassing 3,315 religious communities and 173 religious associations, monasteries, missions, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, and schools. The BOC has 1,643 religious communities, 15 dioceses, seven schools, 35 monasteries, 15 brotherhoods, and 10 sisterhoods. The Roman Catholic Church has four dioceses, five schools, 11 missions, nine monasteries, and 491 communities. Protestant religious organizations of 14 denominations have 1,057 religious communities, 21 associations, 22 missions, and five schools. There are 33 religious communities of Old Believers registered. There are three Jewish religious associations – Orthodox, Chabad-Lubavitch, and Reform Judaism – comprising 52 communities, including 10 autonomous communities. In addition, 25 Muslim religious communities, 24 Sunni and one Shia, are registered.

National religious associations include the BOC, the Roman Catholic Church, the Old Believers Church, the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, the Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith, the Confederation of Christian Seventh-day Adventists, the Association of New Apostolic Churches, the Union of Full Gospel Christian Churches, the Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, the Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Churches, the Jewish Religious Union, the Association of Jewish Religious Communities, the Union of Reform Judaism Communities, the Muslim Religious Association, the Spiritual Board of Muslims, and the Religious Association of Bahais.

To register, a religious community must submit an official application with the following information: a list of its founders' names, places of residence, citizenship, and signatures; copies of its founding statutes; the minutes of its founding meeting; and permission from the regional authorities confirming the community's right to occupy or use any property referenced in its founding statutes. A religious group not previously registered by the government must also submit information about its beliefs. In the latter case, the law stipulates authorities may take up to six months to review a registration application due to an additional evaluation of the religion by a state-appointed religious commission of experts. The commission evaluates the fundamental teachings of the religion; its rituals, practices, history, forms and methods of activities; its welfare and charitable services; its proselytizing and missionary activities; its approaches towards marriage and family; its educational activities; its attitudes toward healthcare; and its compliance with legal requirements. In addition, the community must submit any texts written by its founder or considered sacred by the followers of the religion; information about prohibitions on clergy or adherents;

a list of countries where the religion is widely practiced; a list of countries officially recognizing the religion; information about countries which have refused to recognize the religion; and information about court cases against followers of the religion in other countries.

Regional government authorities as well as the Minsk city authorities or local municipal authorities (for groups outside of Minsk) review all registration applications. Permissible grounds for denial of registration are broad and include failure to comply with requirements for establishing a community; an inconsistent or fraudulent charter or other required document; violations of the procedures to establish religious organizations; or a negative evaluation by the state-appointed religious commission of experts. Communities may appeal refusals in court.

In order to register as a religious association or national religious association, a group must provide an official application with a copy of the founding statutes, a list of members of the managing body with biographical information, proof of permission for the association to be at its designated location, and the minutes from its founding congress. Religious associations have the exclusive right to establish religious educational institutions and organize cloistered and monastic communities. All applications to establish associations and national associations must be submitted to OPRRNA, which has 30 days to respond. Grounds for refusal are the same as for religious communities except they also include failure to comply with requirements for establishing an association rather than a community. Refusals or a failure by OPRRNA to respond within the 30-day period may be appealed in court.

The law confines the activities of religious communities and associations to the jurisdictional area where they are registered. The law permits state agencies in charge of registration to issue written warnings to a registered religious group for violating any law or undertaking activities outside the scope of responsibilities in the group's charter. The government may apply to a relevant court, depending upon jurisdiction, to shut down the group if it has not ceased the illegal activity outlined in the written warning within six months or if the activity is repeated within one year of the warning. The government may suspend activities of the religious group pending the court's decision. The law contains no provision for appeal of the warning or suspension.

The law bans all religious activity by unregistered groups and subjects group members to penalties ranging from unspecified fines to two years in prison.

The housing code permits religious groups to hold services at residential premises if the local authorities grant permission. The local authorities must certify the premises comply with a number of regulations, including fire safety, sanitary, and health code requirements. Such permission, however, is not granted automatically, and the law does not permit religious groups to hold services in private residences without prior permission from local authorities.

By law all religious groups are required to seek permits to hold events outside of their premises, including proselytizing.

The law requires all religious groups to receive prior governmental approval to import and distribute religious literature. The approval process includes official examination of the documents by state-appointed religious studies experts.

Although there is no law providing for a systematic restitution process for property, including religious property, seized during the Soviet and Nazi periods, groups may apply for the restitution of property to local authorities. The law on religion specifically bans the restitution of seized property used for cultural or sports purposes.

The law permits associations and national associations to establish schools to train clergy, but does not permit religious communities to do so.

The law only permits registered religious groups which are members of national religious associations to organize extracurricular religious activities at educational institutions. The law states the national religious association must first conclude an agreement on cooperation with the MOE. Students who wish to participate in voluntary “moral, civic, and patriotic education” in collaboration with religious groups must either provide a written statement expressing their desire to participate or secure their legal guardians’ approval. According to the law, “such education shall raise awareness among the youth against any religious groups whose activities are aimed at undermining Belarus’ sovereignty, civic accord, and constitutional system or at violating human rights and freedoms.”

The law prohibits religious groups from conducting activities in schools without identifying themselves. It also prohibits visits from representatives of foreign religious groups; missionary activities; collections of donations or fees from students for religious groups or any charity; distribution of religious literature, audio, video, and other religious materials; holding prayer services, religious

rituals, rites, or ceremonies; and placing religious symbols or paraphernalia at educational institutions.

The law does not allow homeschooling for religious reasons, or private religious schools.

The law establishes penalties ranging from fines to five years in jail for failure to fulfill mandatory military service, with an exemption for conscientious objectors for religious reasons. On July 1, the government enacted a new provision of law allowing for alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. An individual seeking to perform alternative civilian service in place of military service must provide a written justification, including his biographic details, religious beliefs, and any other documents to prove his affiliation with a religious group. The length of alternative service for individuals without a bachelor's degree is 36 months and for those with bachelor's degree 24 months. If approved, individuals will serve at healthcare institutions, nursing homes, housing and public utility services, forestry and agricultural institutions, or road maintenance and construction agencies, and have the right to ask to change the place of alternative civilian service. Within three months after completion of their service, individuals have the right to obtain permanent employment where they performed their alternative service. By law individuals who evade alternative civilian service may face up to five years in jail.

Only registered religious associations may apply to OPRRNA for permission to invite foreign clergy to the country. OPRRNA must grant permission before foreign religious workers may serve in local congregations, teach or study at local institutions, or participate in charitable work. Such permission is generally granted for a period of one year, which may be reduced or extended. OPRRNA has 30 days to respond to requests for foreign clergy permits (religious visas), and may deny requests without explanation. There is no provision for appeals.

By law the government permits foreign missionaries to engage in religious activity only in the territorial area where their religious association is registered. Transfers of foreign clergy within a religious association, including from one parish to another, require prior government permission. By law foreigners may not lead religious groups. The authorities may reprimand or expel foreign citizens who officially are present in the country for nonreligious work if they lead any religious activities. Law enforcement agencies on their own initiative or in response to recommendations from other government entities, such as the security service, may require foreign clergy to depart the country.

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

Government Practices

The government continued to detain or fine individuals for organizing or hosting unauthorized religious meetings in private homes, for proselytizing, and for refusing to serve in the military despite the enactment of a law permitting alternative service. Minority religious groups continued to have difficulty registering and in some cases remained reluctant to apply for registration, reportedly out of fear of harassment and punishment. The government stated it might revoke the registration of several Jehovah's Witnesses communities. The government also continued its surveillance of minority and unregistered religious groups, especially those it labeled as "foreign" or "cults." According to human rights groups, prison authorities denied Muslim and Protestant clergy, as well as clergy from nontraditional faiths, access to prisoners of their faiths, while they granted such access to BOC and Roman Catholic clergy. Protestant and other minority religious groups continued to have difficulties obtaining buildings to use as houses of worship. The government denied visas and requests to extend the stay of some foreign missionaries, but also rescinded denials previously given to other clergy.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, there were three incidents in which authorities detained Jehovah's Witnesses for sharing their beliefs with others. In Stalbitsy, on June 2, police detained two Jehovah's Witnesses who were expressing their beliefs to their neighbors. On July 4, the case went to court but was dismissed. The authorities also briefly detained Jehovah's Witnesses in Krychau and Minsk but subsequently released them without charge.

On February 8, a court in Horki fined Liliya Shulhan, a member of the local Baptist community, 210 rubles (\$110) for hosting a religious meeting in her private home in December 2015. Shulhan disputed the charge saying "it was not a worship service but a friendly meeting of people who shared the same beliefs."

On July 18, a district court in Homyel fined Siarhei Bondarau, a local ISKON community member, 42 rubles (\$21) for holding an unsanctioned demonstration and singing religious songs in public in Pinsk on May 24.

On May 18, a Brest district court fined local Jehovah's Witnesses member Viktor Kalina 2,100 rubles (\$1,100) for refusing to serve in the army. The court rejected Kalina's request for alternative civilian service. A higher court dismissed his

appeal on June 24, leaving Kalina on the verge of entry into the military, while he filed another request for the alternative service. As of the end of the year, Kalina had not been drafted into the military and there were no further developments.

Christian groups continued to state the registration requirements for religious groups remained complex and difficult to fulfill, which they said restricted their activities, suppressed freedom of religion, and legalized criminal prosecution of individuals for their religious beliefs. The government's guidelines for evaluating registration applications remained sufficiently broad, they said, to continue to give authorities a pretext for denying applications from groups they considered unacceptable. Authorities in Mariyna Horka refused registration to a Jehovah's Witnesses community on February 19. Local authorities in Barysau and Lida continued to deny registration applications from Jehovah's Witnesses. Authorities also continued to deny registration to several Protestant religious communities, including a Baptist community in Slutsk.

The PRRNA on February 2 stated the government might revoke the registration of "some Jehovah's Witnesses communities across the country" for allegedly violating laws, including the purported illegal distribution of religious literature. The Association of Jehovah's Witnesses communities disputed the allegations and stated their communities had not received any warnings of possible violations of the law and would work with local authorities to ensure compliance with the law.

Independent religious experts continued to report minority religious groups remained reluctant to apply for registration because members continued to be unwilling to provide their names as part of the application process out of fear of harassment and punishment by the authorities.

The government continued to monitor minority religious groups, especially those it labeled "foreign" or "cults." According to various observers, government ideology officers continued to monitor the activities of members of unregistered religious groups in their workplaces, although there were no reports of prosecutions. According to religious leaders, state security officers also continued to attend religious services of registered Protestant communities to conduct surveillance, which group members described as intimidation and harassment.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, in Mahilyou, local authorities sent letters to schools and state-run institutions in the region in May, notifying administrators about members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, their places of worship, and reportedly describing them in offensive terms.

Many unregistered religious groups stated they continued to maintain a low profile because of what they believed to be government hostility and out of fear of criminal prosecution. According to independent religious experts, many registered religious communities also remained reluctant to report abuses and restrictions out of fear of punishment.

Nontraditional religious groups continued to state the procedure for registering and using residential premises for religious gatherings remained cumbersome and arbitrary. On May 17, authorities revoked permission granted in 2014 for a registered Jehovah's Witness community in Homyel to hold religious services at a private home.

In March authorities in Mahilyou warned the local Jehovah's Witnesses community it could be held liable for holding religious events in public venues and residential areas and for distributing religious materials without permits.

The Jehovah's Witnesses reported local officials in Vitsebsk denied a request for a convention to be held in the city without providing any explanation.

Human rights groups reported prison administrators continued to deny Muslim and Protestant clergy, as well as clergy from nontraditional faiths (any faiths not among the four recognized "traditional"), permission to visit inmates in prison. At the same time, they said, authorities continued to grant BOC or Roman Catholic clergy permission to visit believers in jail on a regular basis, and many prisons had designated Orthodox religious facilities.

On February 2, the PRRNA made a public statement criticizing the Roman Catholic Church for failing to train local clergy, resulting in a "shortage of human resources" which the Church tried to rectify by subsequently inviting a large number of clergy from abroad to practice in the country. He said complaints about the lack of fluency of foreign priests in either Russian or Belarusian were "justified." On February 5, the Conference of Roman Catholic Bishops in the country issued a statement objecting to the PRRNA statement, saying the Church trained clergy at its "discretion" and the issue was an internal matter for the Church. The statement by the Conference of Bishops included information about 19 Belarusian students enrolled in 2015 in seminaries in the country and abroad for training.

Religious groups, especially Protestants, continued to report they remained cautious about proselytizing and distributing religious materials due to what they said was the general atmosphere of intimidation and fear of punishment. Orthodox literature, they said, remained available countrywide. They also said the BOC remained able to proselytize freely and, unlike other religious groups, continued to be allowed to participate in government-sponsored public events, such as rallies, without the need to seek prior approval from authorities.

In April the OPRRNA denied a request by the Jehovah's Witnesses to import the April issue of the magazine *The Watchtower* on the basis the magazine contained materials aimed at the "infringement of rights, freedoms, and lawful interests of the citizens, which impede performance of their duties in the society and their family." The Jehovah's Witnesses stated the government's denial did not specify what the "materials" in question were and did not outline the reasoning used to reach the decision.

Religious groups continued to report problems purchasing properties as places of worship. Converting residential property to religious use also remained difficult, they said. Renting a public facility to hold religious services remained difficult as well, especially for unregistered groups. For example, some Protestant communities continued to report they were only able to conclude short-term lease agreements with the owners of the facilities the communities rented, which continued to allow authorities to pressure owners to terminate or not renew lease agreements as a means of preventing religious activities. Protestant groups stated they continued to be more severely affected than other groups in this regard due to the fact they were less likely to own religious facilities and their private homes were too small to accommodate their numbers.

There continued to be no progress on the freeze placed on the assets of the New Life Church (NLC), although the Minsk authorities did not renew their attempts to evict the Church from its premises, which had begun in 2007 and continued through 2012 after the authorities had refused to register the Church at its location. The NLC continued to use the space for religious purposes but remained unable to obtain proof of ownership from the authorities and had no access to electricity. The NLC leadership continued to meet with Minsk city authorities to negotiate the status and operations of the Church, but without result as of the end of the year.

Following articles in independent media outlets and reported complaints from local residents, authorities in Minsk reburied remains unearthed during work in April to expand a road at the site of a former Lutheran cemetery, which had stopped

operating in 1968. Authorities installed a plaque to commemorate the remains buried at a cemetery on August 4.

The government continued the requirement for students to use textbooks which representatives of nontraditional religious groups said promoted intolerance towards them, citing chapters in the books which labeled such groups as “sects” as discriminatory. The government continued to make no changes to these textbooks despite requests from religious groups.

School administrators continued to cooperate only with the BOC among registered religious groups based on the BOC’s concordat with the government. School administrators continued to invite BOC priests to lecture to students, organize tours of BOC facilities, and participate in BOC festivities, programs, and humanitarian projects.

Religious groups said the government continued to apply visa regulations in ways restricting the ability of foreign missionaries to live and work in the country. According to Forum18, an international NGO, in April the OPRRNA denied a Catholic priest from India permission to enter the country for spiritual exercises he was due to lead in the Roman Catholic parish in the village of Ross in the Hrodna region on July 22-24. The authorities had approved Manjackal’s two previous visits, including in 2015. In May the authorities did not extend the permission previously granted to a Polish priest to conduct religious activities in the Hrodna diocese and denied him a residence permit although he had served in the diocese since 1991.

In July OPRRNA revoked a previous decision not to renew religious work permits for three Polish priests, allowing them continue their service in parishes in Mahilyou, Ivyanets, and Kalodzishchy, respectively.

On November 10, authorities in the Mahilyou region warned a local Baptist community in the town of Babruisk they would remove the community’s registration if the community again invited foreign citizens to speak at the community’s prayers without official permission from the local authorities. This warning was in response to a visit by a group of U.S. citizens who reportedly attended and spoke at the Baptist services on September 9 and 10.

The authorities continued to give permission to the BOC to collect charitable donations in public as well as on its religious property. While the law did not restrict other religious groups from raising donations in public, the groups said they

continued to limit their fundraising activities to their own places of worship or other properties based on the harassment they had received from the authorities if they tried to raise donations at other locations.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The BOC, in particular the Minsk-based parish of the Feast of the Presentation of Blessed Virgin, continued its annual commemoration honoring Hauryil Belastoksky, a child allegedly killed by Jews near Hrodna in 1690, as one of its saints and martyrs. Jewish community leaders again expressed concern over the memorial prayer recited on the anniversary of Belastoksky's death on May 3, the text of which included a passage stating the "martyred and courageous Hauryil exposed Jewish dishonesty."

In Valozhyn in May unknown individuals vandalized a memorial honoring 800 local Jews killed in 1942 near the town of Ivianets. Part of the plaque was broken and a swastika was painted on the fence of the memorial. On May 25, authorities in Valozhyn opened a criminal case, but the investigation yielded no developments as of the end of the year.

On July 9, Minsk Jewish community members reported they saw yellow paint on sculptures at the Holocaust memorial called "Yama" (the Pit) dedicated to the Minsk ghetto victims. Authorities opened an investigation after appeals from the National Union of Jewish Communities and Organizations but as of the end of the year, they had no developments to report.

On November 19, local Jewish activists reported unidentified vandals had sprayed black paint on a monument commemorating thousands of Jews killed by Nazis in the local ghetto during the Holocaust in Mahilyou. Police opened a criminal case and on November 22 detained four individuals, who reportedly expressed Nazi ideas and belonged to a local skinhead group. Police identified and charged four suspects. The case remained under investigation as of the end of the year.

In November unidentified individuals painted a swastika on the plaque of a memorial, located on the site of the former Jewish ghetto in central Pinsk, honoring Jewish victims of the Holocaust as well as commemorating the killing of the Roma, partisans, and underground fighters by the Nazis during World War II. On November 30, the Pinsk police opened an investigation into the vandalism of the memorial. There was no information available on the status of the investigation as of the end of the year.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In May U.S. embassy officials and a visiting professor of religion from the U.S. sponsored by the U.S. embassy met with the PRRNA to discuss the religious situation in the country, including requirements for registration and operation of religious groups, visa regulations for foreign clergy, and distribution of religious literature.

The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officers continued to meet regularly with representatives of minority religious groups. They discussed anti-Semitism and the preservation of Jewish religious heritage with Jewish religious groups, and government restrictions on registration and operations with the Jehovah’s Witnesses, ISKON, and Protestant groups. Embassy officers also continued to hold regular discussions about restrictions on religious freedom with religious freedom activists, religious leaders, lawyers for religious groups, and representatives of the For Freedom of Religion initiative, a group of civil society activists promoting religious tolerance.

As part of the embassy-sponsored visit of the U.S. professor of religion, the Charge d’Affaires organized a meeting with representatives of the country’s minority religious communities, which provided another opportunity to discuss their situation and the best means of protecting their right to practice their faiths.