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BELARUS

OTHER COUNTRIES AND REGIONS MONITORED

KEY FINDINGS

USCIRF continues to monitor the situation in Belarus, where the government tightly regulates religious communities through an extensive security and religious affairs bureaucracy that has driven some groups underground. Officials are particularly hostile toward religious groups viewed as political opponents, such as Protestants. The government strictly controls foreign citizens who conduct religious activity, particularly Catholic priests. The rights of prisoners, even those on death row, to practice their religion or belief are routinely denied. In 2016, a new alternative service law came into force, but it does not fully protect the right to conscientious objection to military service.

BACKGROUND

Of Belarus' 9.6 million population, an estimated 68 percent belongs to the Belarusian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, 15 percent is of no professed religion, and 14 percent is Roman Catholic. The remaining 3 percent belongs to other religious groups, which include Protestants, Muslims, Jews, Ukrainian or Greek Catholics, other Orthodox communities, Old Believers, Lutherans, Jehovah's Witnesses, Apostolic Christians, Hare Krishnas, Baha'is, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Armenian Apostolics.

Government Control over Religious Activity

A government agency, headed by the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, oversees an extensive bureaucracy to regulate religious groups; each of the country's six regions employs multiple religious affairs officials, as does the capital city of Minsk. Officials from local Ideology Departments and the Belarusian secret police (which retains the Soviet-era title, KGB) also are involved in religious controls. The 2002 religion law, which includes compulsory state registration of all communities and geographical limits on religious activity, is central to a wide web of regulations that tethers all registered religious groups. The religion law recognizes the "determining role" of the Moscow Patriarchate Belarus Orthodox Church (MPBOC) in national traditions and deems four faiths "traditional"—Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and Evangelical Lutheranism—but does not include the Old Believers and Calvinist churches,

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government, in its limited engagement with the government of Belarus, continue to raise with Belarusian officials concerns about freedom of religion and belief and related human rights, as well as making sanctions relief contingent on progress on these issues. In addition, the U.S. government should raise publicly Belarusian religious freedom issues at appropriate international fora, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations, particularly the need for reform of its religion law.

present in the country since the 17th century. Non-MPBOC Christian communities only can gain registration with the approval of a local MPBOC bishop. In January 2016, President Alexander Lukashenko publicly stated that he did not understand the concept of separation of church and state and described the MPBOC as one of the foundations of the Belarusian state.

Religious meetings in private homes must not occur regularly or involve large numbers of people. Use of houses of worship and any public exercise of religion requires state permission, which is rarely granted for disfavored groups, particularly Protestants. MPBOC and Catholic communities are less affected, partly due to the state's more positive view of them, but also because they are more likely to occupy historic churches. The New Life Church, a 1,000-member Pentecostal congregation in Minsk, has struggled since 2002 to keep control of its private church property, a renovated cow barn that authorities claim cannot officially be used as a church.

Unregistered religious activity usually is treated as an administrative offense punishable by a fine. Since registration is compulsory, the religion law makes no provision for those who do not wish to register, such as the Council of Churches Baptists and a similar Pentecostal group. A religious group found to have violated the religion law must correct the alleged violation within six months and not repeat it for one year, or face closure. There is no legal avenue for religious groups to challenge such warnings. Jehovah's Witnesses often have tried, but failed, to establish the legal right to challenge such rulings.

Restrictions on Foreign Catholic Priests

As a major international organization representing the country's largest religious minority, and with close ties to the neighboring democratic country of Poland, the Roman Catholic Church is viewed with suspicion by the Belarusian government. In particular, the government finds fault with the appointment of non-Belarusians as Catholic priests in Belarusian parishes; even temporary visiting priests require the government's permission to celebrate Mass. In February 2016, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Leonid Gulyako was publicly critical of Catholic priests' "destructive" activity, and also criticized the Roman Catholic Church for its alleged failings in training clergy. In May 2016, Plenipotentiary Gulyako revoked Polish Catholic priest Andrzej Stopyra's permission to conduct religious activity; Father Stopyra had been serving in his parish for over 20 years, and was forced to return to Poland. In June 2016, the government denied a short-term visa to a Catholic priest from India. In September 2016, President Lukashenko called on "other confessions" to follow the example of the MPBOC and employ only Belarusians. In December 2016, Plenipotentiary Gulyako refused a request from the Catholic Church to appoint a Russian citizen as a parish priest near Vitebsk.

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Restrictions on Religious Minorities

In February 2016, Plenipotentiary Gulyako threatened to revoke the registration of Jehovah's Witness communities, although he lacks the legal authority to do so. That same month, a Baptist pastor's car and computer were seized as payment for a fine assessed in June 2015 for holding an unauthorized prayer meeting. In June 2016, a request from an elder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Belarus to allow Adventist high school students to reschedule parts of their final examinations to avoid conflicting with the Sabbath was refused. In October

2016, a Baptist congregation in the Mogilev area was threatened with dissolution by the local administration for permitting U.S. visitors to take part in services.

New Alternative Service for Conscientious Objectors

Belarus' first Alternative Service Law entered into effect on July 1, 2016. Members of pacifist religious communities will be eligible for civilian alternative service, under control of the Labor and Social Security Ministry, for a term that is twice as long as military service. The new law does not address the status of objectors from religious communities that are not formally pacifist, or the status of nonreligious conscientious objectors. Young men already in military service cannot apply for alternative service if they change their views. At least two cases of persecution of conscientious objectors may still be outstanding. In February 2016, Jehovah's Witness Dmitrii Chorba reported being subjected to conscription again after the failure of several 2015 court attempts to punish him. In June 2016, Jehovah's Witness Viktor Kalina lost an appeal to overturn his conviction after his second trial on charges of refusing military service. No further information is available about the status of either case.

Other Restrictions on Religious Activity

According to a June 2016 interview by the Poland-based Belsat independent TV channel with an imam in the city of Grodno, police arbitrarily confiscated books from the Grodno mosque during a search for extremist materials in the spring of that year. In July 2016, a court fined a member of the Hare Krishna religious community for singing in public; this is the first known such punishment of Hare Krishna followers, whose distinctive public processions the Belarusian authorities had tolerated.

February 2017 Protests

In February 2017, mass demonstrations protested President Lukashenko's plan to build a business center at Kuropaty where thousands of Stalin's victims are buried, halting the construction. Local Roman Catholic Metropolitan Tadeuzh Kondrusevich has spoken against the construction plan. While not an official sacred site, it is a popular place of pilgrimage and commemoration.

ETHIOPIA

OTHER COUNTRIES AND REGIONS MONITORED

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom violations are prevalent in a number of countries in the Horn of Africa region. The Ethiopian government engages in serious religious freedom violations in response to concerns about terrorism and religious extremism.

BACKGROUND

Ethiopia is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country. The 2007 census estimates 44 percent of the country's population is Ethiopian Orthodox, 35 percent is Sunni Muslim, and 19 percent is Evangelical and Protestant. Small numbers of Eastern Rite, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and followers of indigenous religions also are present. Religious and ethnic identities often overlap.

Ethiopia has a long history of religious tolerance and interreligious cooperation. The Ethiopian constitution protects freedom of religion or belief and provides for separation of religion and state.

Interference in the Muslim Community and Convictions for Peaceful Protests

In response to concerns about rising extremism, in 2011–2012 the Ethiopian government imposed the al-Ahbash interpretation of Islam on the country's Muslim community; interfered in the independence of the community's representative body, the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council; and then arrested and prosecuted Muslims who opposed these actions through peaceful protests.

[A]t least 50 additional peaceful protestors reportedly remain detained and are being prosecuted for demonstrating against the continued imprisonment of Muslim leaders.

In 2015, 18 leaders of the 2012 Muslim protest movement were convicted of plotting to institute an Islamic

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

USCIRF recommends that in its policies toward Ethiopia, the U.S. government should (1) call for the release of religious prisoners of conscience; and (2) include religious freedom promotion in countering violent extremism programs

government and sentenced to seven to 22 years in prison under Ethiopia's controversial Anti-Terror Proclamation (ATP). U.S. government officials and human rights organizations have criticized the Ethiopian government's use of the ATP to silence critics. Since those convictions, the Ethiopian government has pardoned 13 of the leaders, including eight in September 2016. Some of those freed told USCIRF staff during a trip to Addis Ababa in December that government officials have not harassed or prevented them from engaging in religious activities since their release, but that authorities did warn them not to renew protests. Nevertheless, at least 50 additional peaceful protestors reportedly remain detained and are being prosecuted for demonstrating against the continued imprisonment of Muslim leaders. On December 21, 2016, an Ethiopian court convicted 20 of the remaining detainees under the ATP. On January 3, 2017, they were each sentenced to five and a half years' imprisonment.