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2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:

Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Democratic Republic of the Congo

Although there is no constitution currently in effect, the Government generally respected freedom of religion in practice, provided that worshipers neither disturb public order nor contradict commonly held morals; however, government forces committed some abuses.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom in government-controlled areas. However, in areas of the country under the military occupation of Rwanda, Uganda, and their respective rebel clients, respect for religious freedom deteriorated. Credible reports indicate that occupying troops and their rebel allies deliberately targeted Catholic churches as a means of both intimidating the local population and in revenge for the Church's perceived role in the 1994 Tutsi genocide in Rwanda. Credible sources report that these attacks resulted in priests being killed, nuns raped, and churches burned. Rebel and Rwandan authorities also exiled the Bishop of Bukavu, whom they suspected of inciting resistance. However, these actions apparently resulted largely from political, rather than religious, motives.

Relations between the major religions were amicable, with the national consultations serving as a catalyst in promoting greater cooperation.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. The U.S. Government protested the forced internal exile of the Bishop of Bukavu, and repeatedly called for an end to the war and the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

Policy/Legal Framework

Although there is no constitution currently in effect, the Government generally respects freedom of religion in practice, provided that worshipers neither disturb public order nor contradict commonly held morals; however, government forces committed some abuses. There is no state religion.

The establishment and operation of religious institutions is provided for and regulated through a statutory order on Regulation of Non-profit Associations and Public Utility Institutions. Requirements for the establishment of a religious organization are simple and generally not subject to abuse. Exemption from taxation is among the benefits granted to religious organizations. A 1971 law regulating religious organizations grants civil servants the power to recognize, suspend recognition of, or dissolve religious groups. There have been no reports of the Government suspending or dissolving a religious group since 1990, when the Government suspended its recognition of the Jehovah's Witnesses; that suspension subsequently was reversed by a court.

Although this law restricts the process of recognition, officially recognized religions are free to establish places of worship and to train clergy. In practice, religious groups that are not recognized also worship freely.

The Government promoted interfaith understanding by supporting the country's five major churches (Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Orthodox, and Kimbanguist) in establishing the National Consultations, an open forum to explore ways to end the war.

Religious Demography

Approximately 50 percent of the population are Roman Catholic, 20 percent are Protestant, and 10 percent are Muslim. The remainder largely practice traditional indigenous religions. There are no statistics available on the percentage of atheists. Minority religious groups include, among others, Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon).

There are no reliable data on active participation in religious services. Ethnic and political differences generally are not linked to religious differences.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

On January 29, 1999, President Kabila promulgated a decree that restricts the activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGO's), including religious organizations, by establishing requirements for them; however, existing religious organizations were exempt, and the decree subsequently was not enforced.

Although the Government required foreign religious groups to obtain the approval of the President, through the Minister of Justice, foreign religious groups generally operate without restriction once they receive approval from the Government. Many recognized churches have external ties, and foreign missionaries are allowed to proselytize. The Government generally did not interfere with foreign missionaries. However, foreign missionaries have not been exempt from general human rights abuses by security forces, such as restrictions on freedom of movement imposed on all persons by security force members who erect and man roadblocks where they solicit bribes.

In areas under government control, there has been no known persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses or any other groups for practicing their faith in recent years. The Government does not prohibit or punish assembly for peaceful religious services, regardless of faith. The Government does not influence religious teachings to children and places no restriction on the distribution of religious literature.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom in government-controlled areas during the period covered by this report.

Governmental Abuses of Religious Freedom

While the Government is tolerant in matters of religion, some abuses occurred in government-controlled areas as a result of the war. These abuses, usually the ransacking of churches and the pilfering of church property, generally were the result of a lack of discipline among government troops.

A government order in July 1999 prohibiting private radio stations from transmitting foreign radio broadcasts effectively targeted a Catholic radio station that was compelled to cease broadcasting programs of foreign origin. The target was not religious broadcasts; rather it was foreign programs critical of the Government.

On September 14, 1999, security forces arrested Catherine Nzuzi, president of the major faction of the Mouvement Populaire de la Revolution (MPR) party, after she organized a Mass in memory of former President Mobutu on the second anniversary of his death. She was detained for 5 hours on charges of violating a decree on political activity.

In September 1999, government security forces arrested Reverend Fernando Kuthino after his actions sparked street demonstrations by Muslims. The Reverend had converted a Muslim on television, then publicly burned notes that the convert had taken while studying the Koran. Muslims claimed that the burned verses were from the Koran. The Reverend never was tried, and he was released in March 2000.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who were 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.

Due to advances made in the east by military units of Rwanda and Uganda in support of various rebel factions, the Government lost control of more than half the country. It exercises little authority in areas east of the current battlefield. Numerous human rights groups reported significant abuses in these areas by the occupying troops of Rwanda and Uganda, as well as various rebel factions, which targeted Catholic clergy. These reports were confirmed by a number of independent sources, including the Catholic Church. Abuses reportedly took the form of attacks on missions, killings of priests, the rape of nuns, and the burning of churches. Human rights groups claimed that occupying troops and rebels targeted the Catholic Church as a result of its perceived collusion in the 1994 Tutsi genocide in Rwanda. According to one human rights publication, Tutsis "show great hostility" towards the Catholic Church. In the province of South Kivu, rebels of the RCD-Goma faction acting with Rwandan support refused to allow the Bishop of Bukavu to return to his diocese following a trip outside the province. Rebels and their Rwandan supporters forced the Bishop into internal exile as a result of his alleged hostility towards the military occupation of the province.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Relations between the major religions were amicable, with the National Consultations serving as a catalyst in promoting greater cooperation.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the overall context of the promotion of human rights.

The U.S. Government criticized the forced internal exile of the Bishop

of Bukavu, in both private discussions and public statements. On numerous occasions, the U.S. Government also has voiced its opposition to the presence of hostile foreign troops in the country. The U.S. Government also publicly criticized the war, and launched a number of diplomatic initiatives, in concert with the United Nations, to bring the conflict to an end.

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