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2010 Report on International Religious Freedom - Cote d'Ivoire

[Covers the period from July 1, 2009, to June 30, 2010]

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

Some religious tension among Catholics, Muslims, followers of indigenous beliefs, and evangelical Protestants continued with each group believing itself disadvantaged vis-à-vis the others; however, religious leaders made concerted efforts to encourage interfaith dialogue.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 124,500 square miles and a population of 21 million. An estimated 35 to 40 percent of the population is Christian and an equal percentage is Muslim; an estimated 25 percent practices indigenous religious beliefs. Many persons who are nominally Christian or Muslim also practice some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs.

Traditionally, the north is associated with Islam and the south with Christianity, although practitioners of both religions live throughout the country. The political crisis that began in 2002 displaced over 700,000 persons internally, and many fled to a different region. In general political and religious affiliations tended to follow ethnic and socioeconomic lines.

Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Assemblies of God, Southern Baptists, Copts, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

Other religious groups include Buddhists, Baha'is, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and Bossonists, who follow a traditional practice of the Akan ethnic group.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Although there is no state religion, the country's first two presidents were Catholic. For this reason the government has historically favored Christianity, particularly Catholicism.

Muslims were underrepresented in official positions, including in the civil service. Muslims also were underrepresented in state-supported media outlets, particularly radio and television stations.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Maulid al-Nabi, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Pentecost Monday, Lailat al-Qadr, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, All Saints' Day, and Christmas.

The Department of Faith-Based Organizations is responsible for promoting religious freedom and official secularism in the country. It funded construction at religious sites and travel for religious pilgrimages.

The law requires all religious groups to register with the government. Groups must submit an application to the Ministry of Interior's Department of Faith-Based Organizations. This application must include the group's bylaws, names of the founding members and board members, date of founding (or the date on which the founder received the revelation of his or her calling), and general assembly minutes. The Ministry of Interior investigates the organization to ensure that the group has no politically subversive members or purpose.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

Although religious leaders criticized the government without recourse or retaliation, some religious groups complained that the government did not allow all religious groups equal access to national media outlets, including state-run television and radio.

Many northern Muslims continued to feel discriminated against when applying for certificates of nationality and passports, despite the government's continued efforts to issue replacement birth certificates and to ensure that citizens lacking identification documents could register to vote.

Some Muslim organizations viewed the government's organizational requirements for the Hajj to Saudi Arabia as unnecessary and unwarranted interference in religious affairs. Although less publicized, the government also funded some pilgrimages by Catholics. The government's role in determining which groups received subsidies for their religious trips remained a controversial political issue.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some societal discrimination against Muslims and followers of indigenous religious beliefs continued during the reporting period. Other groups, particularly evangelical Christians, complained that some government officials discriminated against them and perpetrated

sectarian hostility at the local level. The ongoing political crisis has created divisions based predominantly on ethnic and economic differences not religious ones.

Religious leaders continued to organize public interfaith activities during the reporting period, issuing joint statements to promote national reconciliation, elections, and tolerance.

The Forum of Religious Confessions promoted dialogue and improved relationships among religious leaders and groups. The Collective of Religious Confessions for National Reconciliation and Peace promoted similar goals and included evangelical churches that had previously refused to join the forum.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy officials regularly met with a broad range of civil society groups that promote religious tolerance.

On April 22, 2010, the embassy's public affairs section organized a book discussion based on the Nouveaux Horizons title *Les religions du monde et la démocratie* with 85 attendees including high ranking religious leaders, members of various religious doctrines, civil society, youth, and media professionals. The panel was composed of Reverend Augustin Obrou, a Roman Catholic priest; Imam Cisse Djiguiba, the spokesman of the Ivorian Superior Council of Imams and executive manager of the National Islamic Radio; and Bishop Rosemonde Kyria Oba Kodjo, a Pentecostal Religious leader and National Coordinator of International Christian Action for Human Rights and World Conference of Christian Churches.

On January 20, 2010, the Information Resource Center Abidjan invited religious leaders and their community members to a Web-chat organized in the framework of the Religious Freedom Day to discuss 'Freedom of Expression and defamation of religion' in the international political context and freely communicate their concerns and contributions about the challenging issue of defamation of religion and its drawbacks on society.

On October 17, 2009, the embassy held its first Interfaith Day of Service organized in conjunction with Habitat for Humanity, an American nonprofit organization in Kplessou, a small rural community located about 6.25 miles from the central city of Toumodi. The day-long activity offered 15 volunteers from the embassy and three local religious leaders – Norbert Eric Abekan, a Catholic Priest, and El Hady Ibrahim Kone, from the Ivorian Islamic National Council – the opportunity to help the people of Kplessou build houses.

On September 16, 2009, PAS organized a conference debate on women's rights in Islam with an International Visitor (IV) program alumnus, Aminata Kane Kone. She instructed the audience on women's rights as stated by the Qur'an and also by the civil law.

The ambassador hosted an iftar (evening meal during Ramadan) at her residence on September 3, 2009. The 36 guests, including 18 imams from multiple faiths, were welcomed by the ambassador and the Deputy Chief of Mission. El Hady Ibrahim Kone, a 2006 IV participant in Religion and the Community, served as the master of ceremonies during the event, and 11 other participants in IV programs on religious and other topics were among the guests.

From July 11 to 17, 2009, Imam Yahya Hendi, chaplain at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. and also imam of the Islamic Society of Frederick, Maryland, led a successful U.S. speaker program on "Islam in America" in the country.

