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2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

U.S. Department of State, September 5, 2000

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22/11-00

THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

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

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

Both government policy and the generally amicable relationship among the various religious communities contribute to the free practice of religion. However, the religious communities often reflect an ethnic identity as well, and societal tensions along those ethnic lines exist. The law places some limits on religious practice, for example, by restricting the establishments of places of worship and restricting where contributions may be made.

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

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

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. Despite the specific mention of the Macedonian Orthodox Church in the Constitution, that Church does not have official status.

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, and the Roman Catholic Church as religious communities, and all other religions as religious groups. However, there is no legal differentiation between religious communities and groups. In early 1999, the Constitutional Court struck down several provisions of the 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups, and in practice the remaining provisions of the law are not enforced consistently.

The Government requires that religious groups be registered. The 1997 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 early 1999. Consequently, there was considerable confusion over which procedures still applied, and several foreign religious bodies experienced delays in their efforts to register. During the period covered by this report, the Government acted to make the remaining requirements more transparent, but 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. A committee has been formed to draft a new law. During 1999 at least one international Protestant church was granted legal registration, and several others are at some stage of the process. One Islamic group withdrew its 1998 application for registration but continues to operate openly without taking further steps toward legal registration. The Government has not taken any enforcement actions against the group. In 1998 the Government rejected the application for registration of another Islamic group headquartered in a third country. The group lodged a judicial appeal that is now under review in the court system. An Islamic Roma group applied for registration in 1998, and the Government rejected its application on technical grounds. The group resubmitted its application, and the Government granted the group legal registration. The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups also requires that foreign nationals carrying out religious work and religious rites be registered with the Government's Commission on Relations with the Religious Communities. The Government does not actively monitor new groups or advise the public on them.

Religious Demography

The country has three major religions. Nominally, about 66 percent of the population of 2 million are Macedonian Orthodox, about 30 percent are Muslim, about 1 percent are Roman Catholic, and about 3 percent are of other faiths. The other faiths are largely various Protestant denominations. No reliable estimate is available for the number of atheists. The Islamic faith is prevalent among ethnic Albanians, who primarily live in the western part of the country and in the capital, Skopje. The Roman Catholic community is concentrated in Skopje.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups places some restrictions on the establishment of places of worship. 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 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 actively enforce most of these provisions of the law but acts upon complaints when they are received.

Several registered Protestant groups were unable to obtain building permits for new church facilities during 1998 due to normal bureaucratic complications that affect all new construction. Several churches and mosques are currently under construction despite the lack of appropriate building 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.

Children below the age of 10 years may not receive religious instruction without the permission of their parents or guardians.

Numerous foreign missionaries are active and represent a very wide range of faiths, mostly Protestant. Many of these missionaries enter the country in connection with other work, often charitable or medical. The 1997 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 has on occasion led to difficulties for those missionaries, as the authorities have questioned their actual reasons for entering the country, usually on tourist visas. On one occasion in 1998, the immigration officers successfully pressed for the voluntary departure of a group of American missionaries who had intended to live in the country and conduct religious activities while holding only tourist visas.

There were no reports that the Government refused Serbian Orthodox priests permission to enter the country as it had in previous years; however, as of mid-2000, no Serbian priests had applied to enter the country.

The issue of restitution of previously state-owned religious properties has not been resolved fully. 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 the 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 can expect to regain much from the expropriated properties.

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

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

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

Section II. Societal Attitudes

There are generally amicable relations between the various religious communities. However, the religious communities often reflect an ethnic identity as well, and societal tensions along those ethnic lines exist. Specifically, most Muslims are ethnic Albanians, while virtually all Macedonian Orthodox believers are ethnic Macedonians. Societal discrimination is more likely to be based upon ethnic bias than upon religious prejudice.

The leaders of the long-established Orthodox, Muslim, and Roman Catholic communities have better connections within the Government than do the leaders of new churches, and there were some indications of an effort by the established religions to use that influence to shut out newcomers.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

During the period covered by this report, the U.S. Embassy initiated an extensive dialog with the Government's Commission on Relations with the Religious Communities, the office charged with the implementation of the Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups. This contact was sought after several American missionaries advised the Embassy that they were having difficulties in their efforts to register their organizations or workers.

The Embassy also intervened successfully in 1999 on behalf of two American students who wished to renew their residence permits. They were having difficulties that they believed were due to unconfirmed government suspicions that they were conducting unregistered religious activities.

The leaders of the various religious communities in the country, as well as the head of the Commission on Religious Communities and Religious Groups, met with the Ambassador on several occasions during the period covered by this report. In addition to including these leaders in invitations to general embassy functions, the Ambassador hosted them at a small private dinner in June 1999. The focus of that working dinner was the advancement of an ecumenical process in the country. During the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe implementation review meeting in Warsaw in November 1998, the U.S. delegation raised its concerns in public interventions and private meetings about the Government's registration requirements for religious organizations.

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