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International Religious Freedom Report

 Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
 October 2001

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, while the Government generally respects this right in practice, it imposes some restrictions.

There was an improvement in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. In July 2000, there were reports of detentions of members of Jehovah's Witnesses by local officials and of radio broadcasts by local officials announcing restrictions on the Jehovah's Witnesses' right of assembly and worship. However, discussions between church leaders, government officials, and U.S. Embassy officials resulted in a reversal of the Government's policy, and in May 2001, leaders of Jehovah's Witnesses in the country reported that they enjoyed religious freedom and that no members of their church were detained or in prison. Tensions lessened between the Catholic Church and the Government, largely due to the clearing of Archbishop Misago of genocide charges, and the reconsecration of some churches and their return to service, as well as increased dialog. However, the Government tore down some storefront churches and continued to watch closely for the development of cult churches after the doomsday cult deaths in Uganda in 2000.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. 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. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 10,169 square miles and its population is approximately 8.1 million. A 2001 study conducted by researchers from Johns Hopkins University reported that 49.6 percent of the population were Catholic, 43.9 percent Protestant, 4.6 percent Muslim, 1.7 claimed no religious beliefs, and 0.1 percent practiced traditional indigenous beliefs. This study indicated a 19.9 percent increase in the number of Protestants, a 7.6 percent drop in the number of Catholics, and a 3.5 percent increase in the number of Muslims from the United Nations Population Fund survey in 1996. The figures for Protestants include the growing number of members of Jehovah's Witnesses and Evangelical Protestant groups. There also is a small population of Baha'is. There has been a proliferation of small, usually Christian-linked sects since the 1994 genocide.

Foreign missionaries and church-linked nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) of various faiths operate in the country, including Trocaire, Catholic Relief Services, Lutheran World Federation, World Vision, World Relief, Adventist Development and Relief Agency, Norwegian Church Aid, Salvation Army, African Muslim Agency, American Jewish Distribution Committee, Jesuit Relief Society, Christian Aid, Christian Direct Outreach, Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, and Jesus Alive Ministries.

There is no indication that religious belief is linked directly to membership in any political party. Of the eight parties, the only one with a religious component to its name--the Democratic Islamic Party--claims to have non-Muslim members.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, while the Government generally respects this right in practice, it imposes some restrictions. There is no state religion.

The law provides for small fines and imprisonment for up to 6 months for anyone who interferes with a

religious ceremony or with a minister in the exercise of his profession.

On April 1, 2001, the Government promulgated a law requiring all nonprofit organizations, including churches and religious organizations, to register with the Ministry of Justice in order to be granted the status of a "legal entity." The registration requirement is not new, and groups can maintain their up-to-date valid registrations, renewing them only when they expire. Major religious groups and churches reported no difficulties in registering with the Ministry of Justice.

Foreign missionaries openly promote their religious beliefs, and the Government has welcomed their development assistance.

The Government permits religious instruction in public schools. In some cases, students are given a choice between instruction in "religion" or "morals." In the past, missionaries established schools that were operated by the Government. In those schools, religious instruction tends to reflect the denomination of the founders, either Catholic or Protestant. Christian and Muslim private schools operate as well.

The Government observes four religious holidays as official holidays: Christmas, The Idd-El-Fitr, All Saints' Day, and Assumption.

The Government, within its limited financial means, has sponsored or participated in a number of religious fora aimed at increasing interfaith understanding and support.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In the past, the Government forbade religious meetings at night on the grounds that insurgents formerly used the guise of nighttime "religious meetings" to assemble their supporters before attacking nearby targets; however, by the end of the period covered by this report, the Government had stopped restricting religious meetings at night and had lifted local restrictions on meetings for worship and proselytizing.

In late 2000, several "storefront" churches consisting of wooden frames covered by plastic sheeting were torn down because the churches were not registered with the Ministry of Justice. In late 2000, a few "storefront" evangelical preachers applied for status as nonprofit groups but were refused following a determination by the Ministry that the groups were profit-oriented. However, by the end of the period covered by this report, the Government's strategy had changed to one of urging the groups to register with the Ministry of Justice in order to regularize their status. At least one application for registration was accepted, and some applications were pending at the end of the period covered by this report.

In July 2000, there were reports of radio broadcasts by local officials announcing restrictions on the Jehovah's Witnesses' right of assembly and worship; however, by the end of the period covered by this report, there were no further reports of restrictions on Jehovah's Witnesses.

There were no reports of any adherents of the Temperance or Abagorozi groups being detained during the period covered by this report.

The Government continued to watch closely for the development of cult churches after the doomsday cult deaths in Uganda in 2000. During the period covered by this report, government officials noted their concerns regarding doomsday cults developing in the country in local newspapers.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Local officials detained members of Jehovah's Witnesses for refusing to participate in nightly security patrols; however, there have been no reports of detention or harassment since late 2000.

Several members of the clergy of various faiths have faced charges of genocide in Rwandan courts, in the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), and in foreign courts, notably in Belgium. Catholic Bishop Misago, who was cleared of genocide related charges in June 2000, again appeared on the list of accused genocidaires after the prosecution announced its intention to appeal the verdict. On October 25, 2000, two Catholic priests were released when their 1998 convictions on genocide charges were overturned on appeal.

Numerous groups, particularly human rights groups, reported that Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA) troops and Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) rebels in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) targeted Catholic clergy for abuse. Abuses reportedly took the form of attacks on missions, killings of priests, the rape of nuns, and the burning of churches. Credible reports indicate that RCD and RPA troops deliberately targeted Catholic churches as a means of both intimidating the local population and in retaliation for the Church's perceived role in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

Between February and September 2000, RCD rebels and Rwandan authorities operating in the DRC kept

Archbishop Kataliko of Bukavu in exile in the Kivu provinces because they suspected him of condoning resistance to the rebellion. These authorities only allowed the Archbishop's return to Bukavu, DRC, on September 14, 2000, following significant U.S. and international pressure. The Archbishop died of a heart attack the following month while in Rome.

Some religious leaders were perpetrators of violence and discrimination. For example, on June 8, 2001, a jury in Belgium convicted four Rwandans—a physics professor, a former government minister, and a nun and her mother superior from a Benedictine convent—for complicity in the murder of approximately 7,000 Tutsis in and around the town of Sovu in the spring of 1994. The two nuns were sentenced to 12 and 15 years, respectively, and the professor and former government minister were sentenced to 12 and 20 years, respectively.

There were no reports of religious prisoners, although some Jehovah's Witnesses were detained in 2000 for refusing to participate in nightly security patrols.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including 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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In the latter half of 2000, the Government lifted restrictions on Jehovah's Witnesses holding meetings and preaching publicly. Members of Jehovah's Witnesses who were detained for non-participation in nightly security patrols were released by September 2000. Senior government officials intervened personally with local officials to ensure that religious freedom is respected at all government levels, and local church members reported that harassment of members by local officials had ceased and that the church now enjoys religious freedom.

Unlike in previous years, few Catholic officials repeated the claim that the Government is prejudiced against the Church; senior clergy reported that relations between the Church and the Government had improved because of collaboration and dialog in the areas of education and reconciliation. The Church and the Government moved closer to a resolution of the question of using churches as genocide memorials, and several churches were reconsecrated and returned to serving the community.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations among the different religious groups generally are amicable. Disputes between religious groups are rare; however, in July 2000, some local authorities increased tensions between groups when they harassed members of the Jehovah's Witnesses for not participating in nightly security patrols and publicly pointed out that Protestants, Muslims, and Catholics participated regularly (see Section II).

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. Embassy officials maintain regular contact with leaders and members of the religious communities in the country.

In July and August 2000, U.S. Embassy officials approached senior government officials in regards to complaints of harassment and detention from local and international offices of Jehovah's Witnesses. In early 2001, Embassy officials discussed the destruction of small storefront churches with senior Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Local Governance and Social Affairs officials.

U.S. Embassy political officers held numerous meetings with members of the Catholic and Anglican Churches, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, leaders of the Muslim community, and small, evangelical Protestant groups, among others, to promote interfaith dialog and discuss religious freedom. In addition Embassy political officers regularly met with local and international nongovernmental organizations involved in peace, justice, and reconciliation efforts that focus on religious tolerance and freedoms.

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Released on October 26, 2001

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