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U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Cote d'Ivoire**International Religious Freedom Report 2002**

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

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government at times limited this right in practice.

The status of respect for religious freedom improved somewhat during the period covered by this report. The successful conclusion of the Forum for National Reconciliation, which took place between October and December 2001, contributed to improved relations between the Government and religious groups. However, after months of improved relations, in June 2002, there were violent clashes between security forces, Republican Rally (RDR) militants, and Ivoirian Popular Front (FPI) supporters prior to local elections. The Government monitors minority religious groups for signs of political activity it considers subversive or dangerous. Some Muslims believe that their religious and ethnic affiliation make them targets of discrimination by the Government with regard to both employment and the renewal of national identity cards.

Relations among the various religious communities generally are amicable; however, there is some societal discrimination against Muslims and followers of traditional indigenous religions.

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 land area of 122,780 square miles, and its population is 15,366,692. Religious groups in the country include Islam, the Adventist Church, the Assemblies of God, the Southern Baptist Church, practitioners of traditional indigenous religions, Bossonism (the traditional religious practices of the Akan ethnic group), the Autonomous Church of Celestial Christianity of Oschoffa, Roman Catholicism, the Union of the Evangelical Church of Services and Works of Cote d'Ivoire, the Harrist Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), the Protestant Methodist Church of Cote d'Ivoire, the Yoruba First Church, the Church of God International Missions, the Baptist Church Missions, the Church of the Prophet Papa Nouveau (a syncretistic religion founded in the country in 1937 that combines Christian doctrine, traditional indigenous rituals, and practical concern for social, political, and economic progress for Africans), the Pentecostal Church of Cote d'Ivoire, the Messianic Church, the Limoudim of Rabbi Jesus (a small Christian group, the origins of which are unknown), the Unification Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Interdenominational Church, the Eckankar religion (a syncretistic religion founded in 1965 in Nigeria that sees human passion as an obstacle to uniting a person's divine qualities), Buddhism, and the Movement of Raelis. Many religious groups in the country are associated with American religious groups.

The published results of the most recent national census, conducted in 1998, indicated that Muslims make up approximately 38.6 percent of the country's population; Catholics make up 19.4 percent; practitioners of traditional indigenous religions, 11.9 percent; Protestants, 6.6 percent; Harrists, 1.3 percent; other Christians, 3.1 percent; practitioners of other religions, 1.7 percent; and persons without religious preference or affiliation, 16.7 percent. Among citizens, 27.4 percent are Muslim, 20.8 percent are Catholic, 15.4 percent practice traditional indigenous religions, 8.2 percent are Protestant, 1.6 percent are Harrist, 3.4 percent are of other Christian affiliations, 1.9 percent practice other religions, and 20.7 percent are without religious affiliation. Foreigners living in the country are 70.5 percent Muslim and 15.4 percent Catholic with small percentages practicing other religions.

Most of the country's many syncretistic religions are forms of Christianity that contain some traditional indigenous practices and rituals. Many such religions were founded by Ivoirian or other African prophets and are organized around and dependent upon the founder's personality. Some emphasize faith healing or the sale of sacred objects imbued with supernatural powers to bring health and good luck. Many nominal Christians and Muslims practice some aspects of traditional indigenous religions, especially in difficult times.

Generally there has been a trend towards conversion by practitioners of traditional religions to Christianity and Islam. Missionary work, urbanization, immigration, and higher education levels have led to a decline in the percentage of practitioners of traditional religions from 37 percent in 1975 to 11.9 percent in 1998.

Muslims are found in the greatest numbers in the northern half of the country, although they also are becoming increasingly numerous in the cities of the south due to immigration. In 1998 Muslims composed 45.5 percent of the total urban population and 33.5 percent of the total rural population. Catholics live mostly in the southern, central, and eastern portions of the country. Practitioners of traditional indigenous religions are concentrated in rural areas of the country's north, west, center, and east. Protestants are concentrated in the central, eastern, and southwest regions. Members of the Harrist Church, an African Protestant denomination founded in the country in 1913 by a Liberian preacher named William Wade Harris, are concentrated in the south.

Political and religious affiliations tend to follow ethnic lines. As population growth and movement have accentuated ethnic distinctions between the groups of the Sahel and those of the forest zone, those distinctions sometimes have been expressed in terms of religion (for example, northern Muslims and southern Christians and traditionalists).

Immigrants from other parts of Africa generally are at least nominally Muslim or Christian. The majority of foreign missionaries are European or American representatives of established religions, but some Nigerians and Congolese also have set up churches.

In the past, Catholic priests tended to be better educated than leaders of other religions. Numerous Catholic schools were founded in the country in the early 1900's during French colonial rule, and citizens who attended these schools generally received good educations and eventually became a disproportionately large part of the country's elites. Many senior government officials, including all four heads of state since independence, have been Catholics. The Baoule ethnic minority, which has dominated the State and the Democratic Party of Cote d'Ivoire (PDCI), which governed the country from independence in 1960 until 1999, largely is Catholic, although some Baoules continue to practice traditional indigenous religion and a few practice Islam. After 39 years of political dominance, the PDCI was driven from power in a military coup in December 1999. Following 10 months of transitional military rule, the country elected a new president from the FPI, another political party composed primarily of Christians and individuals practicing traditional indigenous religions. In January 2002, the country became a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution, implemented in August 2000, provides for freedom of religion; however, at times the Government limited this right in practice. There is no state religion; however, for historical and ethnic reasons the Government informally favors Christianity. For example, the Government continues to subsidize both Roman Catholic and other Christian schools at lower levels than in the past; however, it does not subsidize Muslim schools.

In past years, the Government has paid for the construction of Catholic cathedrals; however, the Government also sponsors or finances the construction of shrines for groups other than the Catholic Church. During the period covered by this report, the Government was directing the construction of the Plateau Mosque in central Abidjan and financing it with the help of governments or government-affiliated religious organizations of some largely Islamic Arab countries.

The Government establishes requirements for religious groups under a 1939 French law. All religious groups wishing to operate in the country must submit to the Ministry of the Interior a file including the group's bylaws, the names of the founding members, the date of founding (or date on which the founder received the revelation of his or her calling), the minutes of the general assembly, the names of members of the administrative board, and other information. The Interior Ministry investigates the backgrounds of the founding members to ascertain that the group has no politically subversive purpose. However, in practice the Government's regulation of religious groups generally has not been unduly restrictive since 1990, when the Government legalized opposition political parties.

Although nontraditional religious groups, like all public secular associations, are required to register with the Government, no penalties are imposed on a group that fails to register. In practice registration may bring advantages of public recognition, invitations to official ceremonies and events, publicity, gifts, and school subsidies. No religious group has complained of arbitrary registration procedures or recognition; however, the Government does not register traditional indigenous religious groups.

The Government grants no tax or other benefits to religious groups; however, some religious groups have gained some favors after individual negotiations. Examples include reductions in the cost of resident alien registration, customs exemptions on certain religious items, and, in some cases, privileges similar to those of diplomats. No particular religion is favored consistently in this manner. Occasionally a state-owned company grants favors to religious leaders, such as a reduction in airplane fares.

Foreign missionaries must meet the same requirements as any foreigner, including resident alien registration and identification card requirements. However, there were no reports that foreign missionaries were denied such registration arbitrarily.

Religious instruction is permitted in public schools and usually offered after normal class hours. Such

instruction is offered by established Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant groups.

The Government has taken some positive steps to promote interfaith understanding. Government officials, including the President and his religious advisers, make a point of appearing at major religious celebrations and events organized by a wide variety of faiths and groups. There is no government-sponsored forum for interfaith dialog, but the Government often invites leaders of various religious communities (but not of traditional indigenous religious groups) to attend official ceremonies and to sit on deliberative and advisory committees, including the Mediation Committee for National Reconciliation.

During the Forum in 2001, Muslim leaders accused the Government of progressively moving the country towards becoming a nonsecular, Christian state. The Muslim leaders claimed that many state institutions, particularly the national television and radio stations, were dominated by Christian programming, including broadcasts of Catholic masses, choirs, religious services, and Christian music. In early 2002, President Gbagbo tasked National Reconciliation Forum President Seydou Diarra with forming an ecumenical commission to define the "non-secular state." The commission met several times during the period covered by this report.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government monitors minority religious groups, including Islamic associations, to the extent of registering them and watching them for signs of political activity that it considers subversive, but does not control them closely; however, the proliferation of new groups has caused some concern among government officials and citizens.

In March and April 2000, local governments closed some Harrist churches, particularly in Bingerville and Grand Labou, to prevent an escalation of intrareligious violence (see Section III). All of the churches were reopened by June 2002 following government mediation and the restoration of unity within the Harrist church.

Unlike in the period covered by the previous report, there were no reports that police or gendarmes searched mosques or homes of imams without warrants.

Traditionally the Government informally has favored the Roman Catholic Church. Catholic Church leaders have had a much stronger voice in government affairs than their Islamic counterparts, which led to feelings of disenfranchisement among the Muslim population. After assuming power following the December 1999 coup, General Robert Guei indicated that one of the goals of the transition government was to end this favoritism and put all of the major religious faiths on an equal footing. However, in practice General Guei did not take any substantive steps to bring this about, nor has his successor, President Laurent Gbagbo. Since the National Forum for Reconciliation, President Gbagbo has met with Muslims leaders to discuss their concerns. In late June 2002, he met with Imam Idriss Kone Koudouss, President of the National Islamic Council. Imam Koudouss called for the Government to support Koranic schools and a new national Islamic center and for government recognition of two more Muslim holidays as national holidays.

Some Muslims believe that their religious or ethnic affiliation makes them targets of discrimination by the Government with regard to both employment and the renewal of national identity cards. Due to the tense political situation in the country and the ethnic and religious divisions along which political party lines are drawn, some Muslims are scrutinized more closely in the identity card application process. As most Muslims share names, style of dress, and customs with several of the country's predominantly Muslim neighboring countries, they sometimes are accused wrongly of attempting to obtain nationality cards illegally in order to vote or otherwise take advantage of citizenship. This creates a hardship for a disproportionate number of Muslim citizens.

Muslims often have had to struggle for state benefits that came more easily to practitioners of other religions. For example, Catholic and Protestant schools are regarded as official schools supervised by the Ministry of Education and subsidized by the Government. However, until 1994 Islamic schools were regarded as religious schools, were supervised by the Ministry of the Interior, and were unsubsidized even if they followed official school curriculums. Since 1994 Islamic schools that follow official curriculums have been subsidized by the Government. The Government recognized no Muslim religious holidays until 1974 and did not recognize all major Muslim religious holidays until 1994. Churches organize Christian pilgrimages without government supervision; however, in 2001 the Government paid for a pilgrimage to Rome for 81 Roman Catholics. Until 1993 the Ministry of Interior supervised Islamic pilgrimages to Mecca for the Hajj, and the Government also offered some financial assistance to Muslim pilgrims. In March 2002, the Ministry of Interior restructured the Government's organization that supervises the Hajj, and Muslim organizations continue to view the Government's actions as unnecessary and unwarranted interference.

Unlike in the period covered by the previous report, there were no reports that government officials criticized Muslim or other religious leaders.

Traditional indigenous religions, which are not registered officially as religions, rarely are included in official or unofficial lists of the country's religions. There is no generally accepted system for classifying the country's diverse traditional religious practices, which vary not only by ethnic group, but also by region, village, and family, as well as by gender and age group. In addition members of the country's largely Christianized or Islamicized urban elites, which effectively control the State, generally seem

disinclined to accord to traditional indigenous religions the social status accorded to Christianity and Islam. No traditional indigenous religious leader (except for traditional rulers, who also may perform some traditional religious functions) is known to have been invited to present New Year's greetings to the President or to take part in a government advisory council. However, traditional Akan chiefs very often are invited to pour alcohol on the ground at the beginning of important ceremonies, even the most official ones, in order to bless the events.

The Government does not prohibit links to foreign coreligionists but informally discourages connections with politically radical fundamentalist movements, such as Islamic groups based in Iran and Libya.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

After months of improved relations, in June 2002, tensions rose between RDR and FPI supporters prior to the July 2002 departmental elections. In late June, security forces and RDR and FPI supporters clashed around Daloa. Muslims accused the security forces of favoring the FPI. At least six persons were killed, although some estimates were much higher. The parties' militants burned mosques and churches, as well as homes and villages, especially those of Muslims.

Also in late June in Abidjan, members of a progovernment activist student union, Fesci, attacked and injured Muslim university students. Muslims accused Fesci of grouping Muslims, northerners, members of northern ethnic groups, and RDR loyalists into one identity.

Unlike in the period covered by the previous report, there were no reports that security forces detained, questioned, or beat Muslims, or that security forces questioned Islamic leaders on suspicions that they were plotting civil unrest.

Citing the killings of hundreds of Muslims during the October and December 2000 demonstrations, National Islamic Council (CNI) President Koudouss accused the authorities and the armed forces of having planned a genocide, adding that Muslims would not feel "reconciled" until the Government apologized to the Muslim community. On May 2, 2002, President Gbagbo met with approximately 100 Muslim community leaders, including Imam Koudouss. He did not apologize; however, he informed the group that he had invited a foreign government to open an Arab language studies center in the country to provide citizens with a better understanding of the Arab world. The Government also chose to refer to all those who lost their lives in the violence surrounding the presidential elections of 2000 as "heroes of democracy."

No action was taken against members of security forces responsible for the December 2000 killing of Kaba Bakary, a 60-year-old Guinean man, reportedly because he was wearing a Muslim robe, which gendarmes believed indicated that Bakary was a supporter of the RDR, or for the beating of Imam Bakary and others following the RDR's December 2000 demonstration.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

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 refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations among the various religious communities generally are amicable; however, there is some societal discrimination against Muslims and followers of traditional indigenous religions.

The country's Islamic communities are subject to some societal discrimination. Some non-Muslims have objected to the construction of mosques, such as the new mosque in Abidjan's Plateau district, because the Islamic duty to give alms daily may attract beggars to neighborhoods containing mosques. Some non-Muslims also object to having to hear the muezzins' calls to prayer. Some persons consider all Muslims as foreigners or fundamentalists, and Muslims often are referred to as "destabilizing forces." Muslim citizens often are treated as foreigners by their fellow citizens, including by government officials, because most Muslims are members of northern ethnic groups that also are found in other African countries from which there has been substantial immigration into the country. Muslims also frequently were discriminated against because of ethnic origin or presumed support of former Prime Minister Alassane Ouattara's candidacy. Many Muslims are northerners and tended to support the presidential candidacy of Ouattara and the RDR and opposed the ruling FPI.

Followers of traditional indigenous religions also are subject to societal discrimination. Many leaders of religions such as Christianity or Islam look down on practitioners of traditional indigenous religions as pagans and practitioners of black magic or human sacrifice. Some Christians or Muslims refuse to associate with practitioners of traditional indigenous religions. The practices of traditional indigenous religions often are secret and include exclusive initiation rites, oaths of silence, and taboos against writing down orally transmitted history. However, there have been no reports of human sacrifice in the country since well before independence. Although the purported practice of black magic or witchcraft continues to be feared widely, it generally is discouraged by traditional indigenous religions, aspects of

which commonly purport to offer protection from witchcraft. Traditional indigenous religions commonly involve belief in one supreme deity as well as lesser deities or spirits that are to be praised or appeased, some of which may in some religions be believed to inhabit or otherwise be associated with particular places, natural objects, or man-made images. However, many practitioners of traditional indigenous religions are unaware of societal discrimination and have not complained.

Conflicts between and within religious groups have surfaced occasionally. The Celestial Christians have been divided because of a leadership struggle. However, in February 2002, the Church reunified after the head of the church in Nigeria reinstated Blin Jacob Edimou, the founding priest of the Ivorian Celestial Church, to his position as head of the Church. Edimou had been removed in 1987 following accusations of impropriety. The Harrists also have internal divisions and have resorted to violence on occasion to resolve their differences. In March 2000, clergy leader Barthelemy Akre Yasse struck Harrist National Committee president Tchotche Mel Felix from the church rolls for insubordination. This battle for church leadership at the national level led to violent confrontations between church members at the local level. In March and April 2000, local governments closed Harrist churches in which confrontations took place in order to prevent an escalation of the violence. However, in November 2001, police used teargas to disperse church members fighting outside one of their churches in the Cocody section of Abidjan. All of the churches were reopened by June 2002 after the restoration of unity within the Harrist church; however, the leadership struggle continued during the period covered by this report.

During the Forum for National Reconciliation held from October to December 2001, tensions flared between Muslims and Christians (especially Catholics) as each group accused the other of interfering with the social and political debates by attempting to impose their respective views and political candidates on the other. The Muslims complained of being marginalized and accused the Catholics of working with the Government to "Christianize" the institutions of state, especially the national television and radio stations. Some smaller religious groups, including Buddhists and the Raelis, accused Muslims and Christians of behaving like state religions.

There are various examples of interfaith cooperation. Once a year, on New Year's Eve, members of all Christian religious groups gather in the National Stadium in Abidjan to keep a night-long vigil and pray. When serious social problems have arisen, simultaneous Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim prayer ceremonies have been held in churches, temples, and mosques to ask for divine assistance. Kouassi-Datekro, a town in the Akan region in the eastern part of the country, is famous for ecumenical events involving simultaneous prayer services of all faiths. Since 1990 religious leaders from diverse groups have assembled on their own initiative to mediate in times of political conflict; however, no leaders of traditional indigenous religious groups have been included. In October 2001, several associations of young Christians and Muslims met at Abidjan Cathedral to create an interreligious forum to contribute to the resolution of the country's problems. In December 2001, Muslim and Christian associations prayed together for peace and national reconciliation at the initiative of the Muslim Senegalese community in the country.

In 1997 the Research Group in Democracy and Social and Economic Development of Cote d'Ivoire (GERDDES-CI), a democracy and civic education group, created the Forum of Religious Confessions. The Forum includes the leaders of many of the country's religious faiths, including Catholics, Muslims, various Protestant groups, several syncretist groups, the Association of Traditional Priests, and the "Bossonists," an association of indigenous Akan religious priests. The Forum is headed by the leader of the Celestial Christian Church, and its objective is to promote dialog, increase understanding, and improve religious leaders' and groups' relationships. The Forum also mediates in times of serious social or political conflicts, as it did in 2001 during violent conflict among rival political and student groups (see Section II).

In 2001 the Forum organized several joint national prayer gatherings with imams and Christian leaders attending each other's religious services. In July 2001, President Gbagbo met with the Forum leaders following a "week of prayers" they had sponsored in support of national reconciliation. The Forum praised President Gbagbo for his efforts, and the President promised continued support for the Forum.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government has monitored and reported on the status of religious freedom, developed and maintained contacts with leaders of diverse religious groups, and discussed religious freedom issues with government officials in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

In 1997 with financial assistance from the U.S. Embassy, GERDDES-CI helped religious groups in the country establish a Forum of Religious Confessions, which included all of the main religious groups (see Section III). The Forum continued to meet during the period covered by this report.

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