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Congo, Democratic Republic of the

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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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 period covered by this report. However, excessive government response to violence by the primarily political group Bundu dia Kongo (BDK) resulted in deaths and detentions of BDK members and destruction of BDK houses and shrines.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. However, there continued to be credible reports that families abandoned or abused persons accused of witchcraft or of being "witches."

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 905,000 square miles and a population of 66.5 million. Approximately 55 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 30 percent is main line Protestant, and less than 5 percent each is Kimbanguiste or Muslim. The remainder generally practices traditional indigenous religious beliefs. Other religious groups include Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Orthodox Christians.

Most religious groups are scattered throughout the country and are widely represented in cities and large towns. Muslims are mainly concentrated in the provinces of Maniema, Orientale, and Kinshasa. Members of the ethnically based spiritual and political movement Bundu dia Kongo (BDK) reside predominantly in Bas-Congo, although BDK has never attempted to gain official recognition as a religious association.

Section II. Status of Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

A statutory order on the Regulation of Nonprofit Associations and Public Utilities provides for and regulates the establishment and operation of religious institutions. Requirements for the establishment of a religious organization are simple and generally are not subject to abuse. Exemption from taxation is among the benefits granted to recognized religious organizations. A law regulating religious organizations grants civil servants the power to recognize, suspend recognition of, or dissolve religious groups; however, no official invoked this law in the period covered by this report. Although the law requires officially-recognized religious associations to maintain nonprofit status and respect the general public order, they are free to establish places of worship and train clergy.

A 2001 decree allows nonprofit organizations, including religious organizations, to operate without restriction provided they register with the Government by submitting a copy of their bylaws and constitution. The Government requires religious groups to be registered; however, in practice unregistered religious groups operated unhindered.

The Government requires foreign religious groups to obtain the approval of the President through the Minister of Justice, and foreign religious groups generally operate without restriction once they receive approval. Many recognized churches have external ties, and the Government generally allowed foreign missionaries to proselytize and did not interfere with their activities.

Public schools permit religious instruction, and religious groups operate many public schools. Parents may choose to send their children to any school, religious or nonreligious.

The National Media Regulatory Authority or "HAM" (Haute Autorite des Medias) may suspend stations, religious or secular, for hate speech or calls for ethnic violence. There were no reports of the HAM suspending a religious broadcasting station during the reporting period.

The Government regularly consulted with several religious groups (including Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Muslim, and Kimbanguiste). The Consortium of Traditional Religious Leaders served as an informal forum for religious leaders to gather and discuss issues of concern.

The Government observes Christmas as a national holiday.

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 period covered by this report.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In response to acts of violence by BDK members, the Government conducted operations to restore its authority in the province of Bas-Congo in February 2008. According to a June 2008 report by the United Nations Organization Mission to the DRC (MONUC), at least 100 persons were killed in the course of these operations. The report concluded that police used excessive or unwarranted force against BDK adherents and destroyed more than 200 houses and every BDK temple they encountered. The report noted that BDK houses, shops, and hospitals were looted during the operation. It cited police for arbitrary and illegal detentions and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment of detainees. Although BDK ideology and practice contains spiritual elements, the BDK is primarily a political organization and was registered as a nonprofit rather than religious organization. In March 2008 the Ministry of Social Affairs rescinded the BDK's status as a nonprofit organization for noncompliance with rules governing nonprofits.

There were no reports of persons detained or imprisoned on the basis of religion. However, in August 2007, security forces in Bukavu, South Kivu province, detained Father Roger Masirika, a Catholic priest, along with a number of military officers and civilians on suspicion of belonging to a rebel movement. The Government continued to hold Father Masirika without charge in CPRK prison in Kinshasa.

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 Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. However, many families continued to accuse children and elderly persons of being witches and forced them from their homes.

As in past reporting periods, there were reports of incidents of individuals attacked, tortured, killed, or driven from their homes when they were accused of being "witches." While "witch" is an imprecise term that is often applied to persons with developmental, behavioral, and psychological problems, there is a common belief that some persons have the power to cast spells on others or are possessed by demons. Accusations of witchcraft can cause widespread fear in a community. For example, in May 2008, according to MONUC, three persons were killed in Bandundu Province on suspicion of being witches. Such actions commonly follow a death that family members attribute to the work of a witch.

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of adults killing children accused of being witches. However, in Kinshasa in January 2008, a woman and other family members attempted to burn alive her 7-year-old stepson who they accused of being a witch after his father died in an automobile accident. Police placed the boy in protective custody. There were also reports of parents abandoning or withholding food from children accused of being witches.

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.

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